

Prepare for Christmas with an eye on the manger

It's easy to fall into the trap, in our efforts to make Advent a prayerful experience, to add it to the growing list of things to do before Christmas. Indeed, with so many social and cultural obligations cluttering the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas, even the holiest among us must find it difficult to stay true to the intention of expectation, prayerfulness and desire to meditate upon the image of the Babe of Bethlehem, lying in a manger.

Imagine how much more difficult it is for the vast numbers who struggle to live out their faith during the commercial

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tsunami that every year brings an increased threat to wipe out the spiritual reason for the season. This year, Catholic parishes have gone farther than ever in their efforts to establish defenses against the onslaught.

While those efforts vary parish to parish, one program in Southwestern Idaho seems to have grown some roots: the Advent Conspiracy. At Sacred Heart in Boise, for instance, the aim isn't to urge people to disengage totally from the consumerism around them;

rather, it encourages people to return to that "subversive" strategy that has worked for 2,000 years: Use the culture to spread the message of Christianity. The goal is not to stop buying gifts; the goal is to buy one less and use the money to support a local shelter or food pantry. It would be folly to ask Catholics to stay out of stores during this season; instead, the goal is to spend less time in stores and to reallocate the time into playing a board game with family, or visiting a local senior center.

Why such a sinister sounding name – conspiracy? First, it's a

nice marketing tool. Make something sound secretive and pretty soon everybody wants to be in on it. Second, people are being called in one Spirit, to build community and to rediscover the real joy that is central to the birth of Christ.

If your parish is engaged in Advent Conspiracy, get involved. If it is not, seek out the opportunities your parish offers to make this Advent special. Each community is different, but for each, the goal is the same. Come Dec. 24, when all the secular preparations are finally in place, will we be able to say the same for our spiritual preparations?

Good prayer habits reap lifelong benefits

When I was only 16, I went to an old Benedictine monk and asked one of the most important questions of my life: How do you pray?

I was already a person of prayer, or I would not have been in the seminary. I attended daily Mass. I said my rosary. I made visits to the Blessed Sacrament.

So why this question about prayer? I remember a vague dissatisfaction with what were sometimes purely external acts. On some level, my mind and heart were disengaged from what I was doing. So, maybe my question boiled down to this: How do I go deeper? The old monk somehow understood that even teenagers can turn to the great tradition of the church and learn to follow the pattern of prayer that underlies the spiritual lives of the Benedictines, Franciscans, Dominicans, Carmelites, Cistercians and Jesuits. He taught me the basic outline in only half an hour.

- Reading. It could be the Bible or a thoughtful book filled with love of God, a stained glass window or a cross held in my hand. God wants to speak to you and you listen. If you are reading the Bible or a book, go very slowly, listening and savoring each word. For example, at this moment, I am looking at a picture of our Lady of Guadalupe. I ponder that gentle face with eyes cast down ... a young woman filled with God. What is God telling me, here? I listen with my mind and with my heart.

- Meditation. You simply think about a passage you have found in the Bible or in a book. In this case, I look at Our Lady of Guadalupe and remember the story I know so well: An oppressed people, a humble man, an archbishop gracious enough to listen, Mary, the wonder of spilled flowers and a sacred image speaking of the compassion of God. I go through the story again, pondering its moments.

- Prayer. You stop thinking about the things of God and start talking to God. Sometimes I speak words of praise and gratitude (many of the psalms begin this way). Sometimes I speak to God about the struggles of my own life, or about the struggles

In the Midst of God's Abundance

By Father William Taylor



of others. I ask questions and dare to express doubts. I speak words of sorrow and thanksgiving. In this case, I think of my own experiences of desolation. I discuss some difficult things with God and ask for certain blessings.

I remember the first time I did this, a 16-year old sitting on a bench overlooking the valley below. I felt my heart soar. The love of God washed over me in waves. I simply sat back, breathing in God's presence, breathing in God's abundant life. After a while, I got arrogant about it and expected God to dutifully provide me with those wonderful waves of consolation. I learned that prayer involves some dry times and some waiting times.

- Contemplation. Here prayer becomes a joy. You stop talking to God and begin what the saints called "feasting on God" or "tasting God." Most

of the time, this simply means resting in God. I let God's love surround me and fill me. There is nothing more to say. I simply sit in God's silence. When my mind becomes distracted (as it usually does), I breathe a prayer-word, like the name of Jesus and sit again in the silence. In this case, I simply let my eyes turn again to that picture of Mary and let the peace reflected in her gentle face fill me.

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Throughout the years, this four-fold pattern has been my basic form of prayer. Recently, I led a group of 16 people in this ancient prayer pattern. We prayed with St. Benedict, and learned to use the Bible – especially the psalms – as the basic source. We prayed with St. Francis and learned to use symbols, like a statue or the stations of the cross. We prayed the Dominican style with St. Catherine of Siena, pondering Christ in his suffering. We prayed with St. Teresa of Avila and her deep silences.

Would you like to deepen your prayer life in this way? I suggest a marvelous series of books from St. Mary's Press called "Companions for the Journey." I got my books on Amazon.com. You could pray with many saints, including those mentioned above or others like Catherine McAuley, Clare of Assisi, Dorothy Day, Francis de Sales, Padre Pio, and more.

Father Taylor is the author of two books on Mormonism and has penned several award-winning pieces for the ICR over the years.

Whoa. Put the brakes on the holiday rush

By Father Eugene Hemrick
Catholic News Service

It was two weeks before Thanksgiving and the awesome autumn day called for a walk down to the botanical garden. To my dismay, they had already put up their Christmas tree. As beautiful as it was, I couldn't but help ask myself, "What's the big rush?"

No doubt the poor economy has merchants hoping that early sales will help business, and with people out of work, perhaps early marketing means extra jobs. Before we canonize these motives, however, it would be wise to reflect on our rushed, quickened culture and what it is

doing to us.

Last year, a news report captured the madness of Christmas sales, portraying wild people running through stores eager to grab the advertised bargains. In the mad rush, one group of people became an uncontrolled mob that killed a person. This sobering event raises the question: Is our culture turning us into frenzied mobs?

It goes without saying that traffic jams, hordes of people coalescing for an athletic event and the sense of breathlessness this creates are common. Advertisements urge us to run to grocery stores and stock up for the holidays or to take advantage of special sales

on gifts we need to buy.

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is not the spirit we should come to expect and embrace. How, then, do we recapture the proper spirit of the holidays?

One way to do this is to substitute one compulsion for another.

The word "compel" means to drive with force, giving the image of being pushed hard to take action. Perhaps the action we ought to take is a hard look

at the driving forces attempting to push and rule us.

What is the merit in doing this? In identifying the forces, we can expose their desirable as well as their undesirable features. This in turn causes us to raise serious questions.

How really enjoyable is being a part of the rushed, frenzied holidays? When last have we absorbed their true spirit and drunk in the holidays' peaceful side?

Are we and our children losing the taste for stillness and the peace they create? Do we know how to be "all there," which is the result of true stillness, and not to be here, there and everywhere? What do we ultimately want to enjoy during the holidays?

Questions like these cause us to stop, think and rethink, and to better align ourselves with the true spirit of the holidays. More important, they slow us down and diminish that rushed feeling.