

Liturgical Notes for Advent-Christmas 2020

The Two-fold Character of Advent



“Advent has a twofold character: as a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming to us is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation”(Universal Norms for the Liturgical Year and Calendar #39, hereafter *Universal Norms*).

A d v e n t - Christmas and COVID-19



By this time we are all growing weary of hearing about COVID-19 and having to adjust our lives in view of the pandemic. 2020 has been a difficult year for all us, especially those of us here in south Louisiana who have had to cope with the onslaught of several tropical storms or hurricanes in addition to the pandemic. What will Advent and Christmas be like for us this year?

Advent is a time of waiting, but we are people for whom waiting is not a welcome activity. We don't like long lines at the stores, or having to wait for necessary information. Think of how frustrated we get when the computer doesn't produce the results we expect in a given time! We have all become impatient with the inconveniences COVID-19 has imposed upon us and we long for a return to “normalcy.” As of the day of this writing, we are still dealing with restrictions on our lives. We do not yet know when those restrictions will end. So we must wait, or assume risk for ourselves and for others.

The spirit of Advent is the perfect situation to address our unrest. Advent teaches us to be in an imperfect situation without being overwhelmed

by it. This is because Advent teaches us to look forward with hope, the hope that God will lead us through this pandemic even as he led the chosen people through the desert to the promised land. Advent encourages us to avoid the temptation to despair or to become cynical in the midst of imperfect situations.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is a prominent figure of expectant, hopeful waiting during Advent. We stop momentarily during Advent to celebrate Mary's immaculate conception, and we commemorate her message of God's care for the poor in the Feast of our Lady of Guadalupe. On the fourth Sunday of Advent we encounter Mary receiving the angel's annunciation of her conception of the world's savior, yet his birth will have to conform to the normal human gestation period. On Christmas we see the fruit of Mary's faithful and expectant waiting—the Savior of the world is born!

If social activities are still being curtailed when Advent comes we have an opportunity to encourage God's people to dedicate more time to watchful prayer, or prayerful anticipation of the Christmas mystery. We might look at the Scripture readings prescribed for each day of Advent and ask how these are enabling us to anticipate Christ's two comings. This would be a good time for households to be together and reflect upon their experience of anticipating the comings of the Lord. Many parishes have live-streamed Masses during the pandemic and continue to do so for the benefit of parishioners who can't get to Church because of the danger COVID-19 poses to them. Perhaps parishes could consider live-streaming some type of Advent family prayer or reflection experience to facilitate family spiritual preparation for Christmas. Often the various members of the family are

running about on their own from one shopping excursion to the next party. Perhaps the greatest gift we can give one another as families this year is a deepening of our love for one another.

Focusing Advent Spiritual Activities. With everything said above it is important not to lose a sense of the purpose of Advent spiritual activities. As is the case with Lent, spiritual activities during Advent can be viewed as “ends-in-themselves” rather than as exercises meant to prepare us for a richer celebration of the Christmas mystery. The way to avoid this is to begin by considering what Christmas is about and then asking ourselves, what we need to do to better prepare ourselves to celebrate the Christmas mystery. What spiritual deficiencies do I currently experience that would prevent me from celebrating Christmas fully? How do I address these?



The Advent Wreath

When is it blessed?

The blessing of it takes place on the 1st Sunday of Advent, or on the evening before the 1st Sunday of Advent. The blessing may take place during Mass, a celebration of the word of God, or Evening Prayer (*Book of Blessings* #1509). The *Order of Blessing within Mass* places the blessing of the Advent wreath in the context of the Universal Prayer (General Intercessions). The prayer of blessing is the conclusion to the Universal Prayer. The wreath may be sprinkled with holy water, and it is at this time that the first (violet) candle is lit.

Color of Candles on the Advent Wreath.

The wreath, constructed of a circle of evergreen branches may have inserted into it either 1) three violet and one rose candle, 2) four violet candles or 3) four white candles (*Book of Blessings* #1510).

Size of the Advent Wreath in a Church. "It should be of sufficient size to be visible to the congregation. It may be suspended from the ceiling, or placed on a stand. If it is placed in the presbyterium, it should not interfere with the celebration of the liturgy, nor should it obscure the altar, lectern, or chair" (*Book of Blessings* #1512).

Lighting the Wreath on Succeeding Sundays of Advent. This is done either before Mass begins or immediately before the opening prayer, and without any added prayers or rites.

Environment and Art during Advent and Christmas

Advent is a season of joyful expectation, yet, the word "expectation" conveys the idea that we are not yet at our destiny. Liturgical environment in the Church during Advent should depict this concept. How do we prepare the environment to say two things: 1) we are moving toward our celebration of the Lord's Nativity and 2) we are anticipating the return of Christ?

We have already mentioned the Advent Wreath, which, by its very nature is a symbol of expectation, since the candles are lit progressively. The Advent Wreath should not appear as an intrusion into the liturgical environment, but should blend into it. Neither should it overshadow the altar and ambo by its size or ornate adornment. Yet, it should not be so diminished that it is hardly noticeable.

The candles are very important on the Advent Wreath; they should be prominent and their flames visible. In a time of shortened days and cold, the candles should connote light and warmth that get us through the time of waiting.

The key to Advent environment is "keep it simple." There should be a big contrast between Advent and Christmas.

Simple Color: blue-purple fabric hung

or draped over liturgical furnishings would be appropriate. Please be reminded that if a violet cloth drapes the altar there should also be a white altar linen and a corporal. Some may even be placed in the nave itself or near its entrance. During the Christmas season gold or white or a combination of these colors should replace the violet. However, be aware that we have a solemnity (Immaculate Conception) and an important feast (Our Lady of Guadalupe) during which the colors need to shift from violet to white.

Plants: Undecorated Norfolk Pines or evergreens may be placed in the sanctuary and nave. The evergreens in the sanctuary could be then decorated appropriately for Christmas. When decorating them for Christmas keep to the seasonal interchangeable colors of gold and white. Some violet colored plants, but not many, could be placed in the sanctuary during Advent. And, of course, everyone loves the poinsettias at Christmas. While the abundance of plants should be greater in Christmas than in Advent, still we need to be careful not to overdo it. Accentuate the areas of focus during the Mass, the altar and the ambo. Again, the sanctuary and nave can be pulled together by the placing of the same kind of plants in both.

Living Plants: The following quote from *Built of Living Stones* (USCCB) is important in the preparation of liturgical environment. "The use of living flowers and plants, rather than artificial greens, serves as a reminder of the gift of life God has given to the human community."

Between Advent and Christmas: With Christmas falling on Friday this year we should have ample time to prepare for a proper liturgical environment for Christmas during the week, and not have to do so on the fourth weekend of Advent.



Celebration of the Sacrament of Penance during Advent with COVID-19 Considerations

Although Advent is not a penitential season in the sense that Lent is, one aspect of our preparation for Christ's return and our celebration of his first coming is repentance, even as John the Baptist exhorts us on the 2nd Sunday of Advent. There have been three primary ways parishes have provided the Sacrament of Reconciliation prior to Christmas 1) The Light Is On For You, 2) Advent Communal Reconciliation Service, 3) Order for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents scheduled outside of 1) and 2) above. As of now we have no official decision on "The Light Is on for You." If an Advent Reconciliation Service is scheduled, social distancing and the state public building capacity guidelines must be adhered to. Social distancing applies to seating and to the encounter between confessor and penitent. All must wear masks. If the Order for Reconciliation of Individual Penitents is celebrated, social distancing must be observed and masks worn. Confessions may be heard outdoors, preferably with chairs for both penitent and confessor, and not in "drive-up" fashion.

Sundays 1 and 2 of Advent



1st Sunday. Flowing out of the end of the previous liturgical year, Advent begins with a focus on the Second Coming of Christ. Therefore, liturgical preparation for the First Sunday of Advent should be

oriented accordingly.

The Gospel reading for the first Sunday of Advent comes from Jesus'

Eschatological/Apocalyptic Discourse in Mark 13. Having predicted the destruction of the Temple (13:1-2), Jesus instructs his disciples about coming social upheavals and tribulation (13:3-23). He speaks of the coming of a “desolating abomination.” Behind this teaching may be Caligula’s stated desire to force the Jews to erect a statue of himself in the Temple in Jerusalem or to the action of Antiochus IV Epiphanes of erecting a pagan altar in the Temple (Dan 9:27; 11:31; 12:11). But the tribulations and upheavals are only a prelude to the Son of Man’s coming (13:24-27). The proper response of disciples is not to be frightened or disheartened at the upheavals and persecutions, but to keep their minds and hearts fixed on the glorious coming of the Son of Man.

The first reading (Isaiah 63:16b-17, 19b, 64:2-7) is from Trito-Isaiah, who prophesies during the early days of the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. With poverty rampant and structures still in ruins from the earlier Babylonian attack there is injustice and unrest in the community. The prophet pleads for an intervention by God to help to restore their society. In the context of the liturgy, the divine intervention sought here probably points to the coming of the Son of Man in the gospel reading.

The second reading (1 Corinthians 1:3-9) comes from the letter’s thanksgiving. Paul is thankful for the spiritual gifts the Corinthians possess, gifts which later in the letter he will have to caution them should not become a source of rivalry. The possession of these gifts and exercise of them properly is a way of anticipating the Lord’s coming. Paul expresses confidence that they will be preserved in faith until day of the Lord’s advent.

The first two readings encourage us to look forward to the day of Christ’s triumph at his return. However, in that time of waiting we can expect to face unrest, even turmoil.



December 8th, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception

Since it is our national patron feast, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception is always a holiday of obligation. Of course, if Bishop Fabre has not lifted the dispensation of the obligation to participate in Mass on Sundays and holydays of obligation, then the faithful will not be obligated to participate in Mass on this day. If this is the case at least one Mass should be offered in the parish for the benefit of those who would like to participate



2nd Sunday of Advent.

Mark has no infancy narrative, as do Matthew and Luke. Following Mark’s superscript which identifies the work as “the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” the evangelist begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, the precursor of Jesus. Some key points of the passage are: 1) John’s mission fulfills Old Testament prophecy, 2) the fact that crowds from Judea flock to him suggests that John has a spiritual message that resonates with the people, 3) his vesture suggests he is a prophet, an institution that seems to have faded out in Israel since perhaps the 4th century BC, 4) his whole mission points to another one sent by God, mightier than he. John’s mission ultimately points to a coming intervention by God.

The first reading, from Deutero-Isaiah, provides the original context for John’s prophetic quote, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” God is coming to intervene in the midst of the Babylonian exiles’ plight. God has a word of comfort for a people who have suffered, a proclamation of relief of hardship, and a declaration of forgiveness of sin.

Terrain that would make travel difficult (mountains, hills, valleys, uncleared land) is used as an image for the obstacles that are preventing Judah’s return to its homeland and to a life under God’s protection. These obstacles will be removed. Then the prophet is told to proclaim loudly God’s intervention “on a high mountain.” The implication is that all the peoples in the region might hear the message of how Yahweh is to manifest his glory by procuring his people’s release and restoration.

The second reading, from the latest document in the New Testament (2 Peter) addresses the issue of the “delay” of the parousia. The concept of a “delay” is in the minds of the intended readers because they are apparently expecting Jesus’ return to have happened. It is not a delay for God, however, who is gradually revealing the mystery of his plan. The author suggests that what is happening is God’s exercise of patience with the conversion process of the readers so that none should “perish.” The author speaks of the parousia with apocalyptic imagery (suddenness of its coming, passing of the heavens, dissolution of the cosmos by fire, complete revelation). Then there will emerge “a new heaven and a new earth” where the old order of things will be out-of-place. This is why the readers must be “without spot or blemish” when that day comes.

Music: This is not the time to use the most popular of Advent Hymns, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” as I will explain below.

Advent Prefaces

Preface I of Advent captures the twofold character of Advent, in that it mentions both comings of Christ and their interconnection. This preface is used exclusively from the First Sunday of Advent through December 16th.

Preface II of Advent. Even though the caption for the preface characterizes it as envisioning the “twofold expectation

of Christ” the wording of it more precisely focuses our anticipation on the celebration of Christ’s first coming. However, the Thanksgiving of the preface connects the two comings in its final sentence when it articulates part of the cause of our gratitude as “already we rejoice at the mystery of his Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer” [at his Second Coming]. This preface is used exclusively from December 17th-24th. It is not used prior to December 17th.



Gaudete Sunday (3rd Sunday of Advent).

Gaudete Sunday captures Advent’s anticipatory joy. The title comes from the first word of the Latin introit to the Mass of the 3rd Sunday of Advent, an introit wherein we are urged to “rejoice.” Gaudete Sunday marks the midpoint of Advent as we move ever closer to our celebration of Christ’s First Coming. The note of joy is also reflected in the Collect and in the first two readings this year. In our liturgical preparation we will want to highlight this aspect of Advent.

Rose colored vestments may be worn on this Sunday.

The Gospel reading for this Gaudete Sunday includes a section of the Johannine Prologue (1:6-8) and a later section about the identity of the Baptist vis-a-vis Jesus (1:19-28). The prologue section clarifies the roles of John and Jesus regarding the divine act of sending light into the world’s darkness. The Word is the light that enlightens every person, John’s role is to point people toward the light. The subordination of John to Jesus we see here in the prologue is echoed in the second part of the Gospel, where John denies that he is either the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet (like Moses who was expected to come). Rather, he tells his questioners that one is coming after him who is mightier than he. So far superior is the coming one that John is not even worthy to do the job of a slave for him (loosen his sandal

strap). John’s purpose is to make ready the way for the one who is to come.

The Gaudete Sunday theme of joy is to be found in the first words of the second reading, when Paul tells the Thessalonians to rejoice. He also instructs them to pray, be constantly thankful, not to impede the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, to be attentive to prophecy and to discern good from evil. These are specifically recommended activities that are directed toward preparing for the Lord’s coming, which in this letter Paul seems to believe will happen soon. Paul provides for us here a model of behavior that we should employ as we fix our gaze upon the Lord’s coming.

The first reading, from Trito-Isaiah, addresses the situation of the Judahites despondency at the monumental task of rebuilding their lives now that they are back in their homeland. The prophet uses the image of the Jubilee Year from Leviticus 25 as a legal foundation for calling Israel to restart the restoration effort, an effort that must begin with the practice of justice and a new start for everyone. Nevertheless, he announces glad tidings for the poor, healing for the downtrodden, liberty for captives (indentured servants?), and release for prisoners, a day of the Lord’s favor. The lifting of these burdens will result in joy for those who experience them in the initial stages of the rebuilding of Israelite society after the exile.

December 17-24

According to *Universal Norms* #41, “The weekdays from 17 December to 24 December inclusive serve to prepare more directly for the Lord’s birth.” A liturgical feature of these days is that, since the Middle Ages, the “O Antiphons” are sung. The antiphons reflect the anticipation of God’s definitive and progressive intervention to save his people by the use of titles for the Savior drawn from the Old Testament. The antiphons on each day

of this period of Advent have been preserved in the following order in the Lectionary:

December 17: O Wisdom.
December 18: O Leader.
December 19: O Root of Jesse’s Stem.
December 20: O Key of David.
December 21: O Emmanuel.
December 22: O King of the Nations and Keystone of the Church.
December 23: O King of the Nations and Keystone of the Church.
December 24: O Emmanuel.

They are also preserved in the antiphons for the Magnificat in the Liturgy of the Hours for the same period, although in a slightly different order, because Evening Prayer for December 24 is 1st Vespers of Christmas.

It would be advisable to highlight the antiphons during this most proximate period of anticipation of our celebration of Christ’s first coming.

During this period from December 17-24, the hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” is most appropriate, for its verses are based on the O Antiphons.

4th Sunday of Advent

This Sunday is nestled within the theological ambience of December 17-24. It is focused intensely on our anticipation of the celebration of Christ’s Nativity. However, the Collect for the Mass reflects the concept of the connection between Christ’s Nativity and his Passion as two events in a continuous act of salvation. The heart of every Mass is the Paschal Mystery. Even in the Christmas Masses we are mindful of the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.

We want to be careful in our liturgical preparation to ensure that our focus on Christmas is still anticipatory and not actualized. With Christmas being on a

Friday this year, parishes have more time to prepare the liturgical environment for Christmas after the 4th Sunday of Advent.

Reenactments: Never, at any time during the liturgies for Advent or Christmas, should there be any kind of “reenactment of the Christmas story” (as is sometimes done with children). It is important that the imparting of the Divine Word in these liturgical celebrations be offered in the form of the proclaimed Word of the Sacred Scriptures which carry our tradition. The form of the Scripture readings contained in the Lectionary is the only authorized form of communication of the Sacred Word of God during the liturgy. Moreover, such reenactments tend to harmonize the various traditions of the Evangelists and rob them of their uniqueness.

On the 4th Sunday of Advent, Cycle B, the Gospel reading is that of the annunciation to Mary that she will conceive the savior. The unusual nature of Mary’s conception (that she conceives without engaging in sexual relations with a man) points to the fact that there will be something special about the child to be born, and that God is intervening into human life to bring about this birth. In the case of Sarah and Hannah, both were barren, but God overcame their sterility. In the case of Mary, her virginal conception is effected by divine power (a holy spirit). What is special about the child to be born is that he is a savior (surpassing Emperor Augustus who bore the title “Savior of the World”) and heir to the throne of his father David. In Acts 13:23 Jesus’ status as David’s descendant points to his role as savior.



The Christmas Season



The Character of the Christmas Season

Next to the yearly celebration of the paschal mystery, the Church holds most sacred the memorial of Christ's birth and early manifestations. This is the purpose of the Christmas season (*Universal Norms* #32)

Note on Christmas Masses for 2020

On December 24, 2020 Bishop Fabre is permitting Vigil Masses to begin at 3:00 PM, if necessary. A priest may celebrate 2 Vigil Masses on Christmas Eve and 3 Masses on Christmas Day (including a Mass at Midnight). If a parish has trended away from Mass during the Night, it may want to consider scheduling that Mass this year, since it is the heart of the Christmas liturgies. Don't forget that the scheduling of additional Masses requires the scheduling of additional liturgical ministers.

Also if the current dispensation from the obligation to participate in Mass remains intact at Christmas, the faithful of Houma-Thibodaux will not have to fulfill the obligation.

Christmas as a Celebration of Divine Light



It is important that we celebrate Christmas as the fulfillment of Advent expectation and hope.

Celebrated near the Winter Solstice, the Christmas texts characterize the birth of Christ as a divine intervention whereby God's salvific light dispels the darkness of hopelessness and sin. We see this especially in the Collects for the Masses During the Night and at Dawn.

Although not mentioned specifically in the Collect for Mass during the Day, the concept of the intervening Divine Light

is found in the Gospel reading from John's Prologue. “What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:3b-5).

With that said, it is important to note that Christmas is a Christological feast. Each Mass, with its prayers and readings, is meant to make a theological statement about the person of Jesus Christ. Even the warm narrative of Christ's birth in Luke 2:1-14 (Mass during the Night) is not about “baby Jesus,” but about who Jesus is according to Luke. He is savior and heir to David's throne. The angelic announcement about Jesus birth as a savior is made against the backdrop of the dark night sky.

Eucharistic Prayer during the Masses of Christmas and Its Octave: Any of the 4 common Eucharistic Prayers may be used for the Christmas Masses. However, Eucharistic Prayer I is especially pertinent to the liturgical celebrations of Christmas and its octave in that it contains a special form of the *Communicantes* for Christmas.

The Anticipated (Vigil) Mass

The Anticipated Mass of Christmas theologically stands on the threshold between Advent and Christmas.

The Collect recalls the Advent expectation of the coming of the Redeemer in the form of God's Only Begotten Son.

It also recalls the anticipation of Christ's Second Coming when it prays that as we welcome our Redeemer we will also “merit to face him confidently when he comes as our judge.”

The Gospel reading for this Mass gives the presider a choice of a long form (including the Matthean genealogy) or a short form (which limits the reading to the narrative of Joseph's struggle and then faithful decision to complete his marriage contract with Mary).

The Matthean Genealogy (1:1-17) depicts Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish regal Messianic expectation and reflects God's gradually unfolding plan of salvation beginning with Abraham and culminating in Jesus.

Jesus is once again depicted in the context of salvation history in the second reading. Paul builds up to the significance of Jesus by recalling the patriarchs (who were called by God) the Exodus, the rise of the monarchy under Saul, and the solidification of the nation under David, who deposed Saul. Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection represent God's definitive act in his unfolding plan. Ultimately, Jesus is the savior.

While participation in the Vigil fulfills one's obligation for the Solemnity of the Nativity, it is important to remember that this Mass actually anticipates the celebration of Christmas. Consider the Gospel acclamation: "**Tomorrow** the wickedness of the earth **will** be destroyed: the Savior of the world **will** reign over us."

Mass during the Night



In the past this Mass was traditionally called "Midnight Mass," and, as many of us remember, was actually celebrated at midnight on Christmas morning.

Recently it has been the practice, in many parishes and even in Rome, to celebrate this Mass during the night on Christmas Eve. When should this Mass be celebrated? First, the third edition of the Roman Missal in English translates the title of the Mass more precisely from the Latin as "Mass

during the Night." Secondly, there is no specific liturgical law which requires that the Mass be celebrated during the night on the morning of December 25th. Thirdly, I offer the following reflection from Liturgy Training Publications' *Pastoral Liturgy* (<http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/0709TimingMidnightMass.php>):

"Which one is 'Midnight Mass,' then, and does it matter if a Mass is at midnight? Not really. The formulary is called Mass "during the night," not "at midnight." If celebrating at 10:30 or 11 p.m. meets pastoral need (like the needs of families for a more reasonable hour), as long as such pastoral need is genuine, it can be a reasonable decision. However, it at least needs to be during the night, and late enough that one can see it as genuinely beginning the celebration of Christmas Day."

Chanting the Nativity of the Lord from the Roman Martyrology (Appendix I of the Roman Missal: This chant (or recitation of it) may be used before Mass during the Night is begun. It may not replace any part of the Mass.

Pastoral Note: Unfortunately, this text, though valuable as a text from ancient Christian tradition, uses a pre-critical chronology of events.

In the Gospel reading for Mass during the Night, the angels announcement of Jesus' birth is characterized as "tidings of joy." This phrase anticipates Jesus' statement that his Spirit-inspired mission is to bring glad tidings to the poor.

If Jesus is compared to King Solomon in the Gospel reading ("swaddling clothes"), the first reading points to a king who would establish justice and put an end to war. This king's birth is light in the darkness of the miseries of slavery and military battles. Isaiah does not identify the king, but many commentators see Isaiah 9:1-6 as a prophecy of the emergence of Hezekiah, who undid many of his father's (Ahaz') misdeeds and sought to

return Judah to fidelity to the Lord. For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy.

Masses on Christmas Day

On Christmas Day the Roman Missal and Lectionary provide texts for two more Masses: one at dawn and one "during the day."

Mass at Dawn: The Collect carries forward the theme of "light" from the Mass during the Night. Jesus Christ is radiant light, which, as we can see from the next clause in the paragraph, is a metaphor for enlightenment.

In the Gospel reading the shepherds are significant players. They receive the divine message from the angel, verify what they are told by viewing the newborn child and then announce what "they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20). Luke comments that what they witnessed was in accord with what was told them. In other words, we have here a depiction of prophecy and fulfillment, a major theme in Luke's Gospel.

The first reading (Isaiah 62:11-12) addresses the people's difficulties in reestablishing themselves during the early post-exilic period. God will manifest himself as Savior, and the indignity that Israel suffered during the exile will be replaced with positive characterizations of them. In Jesus' birth, God echoes the process of our restoration.

Titus 3:4-7 was probably chosen as a Christmas Day text because it mentions the appearance of "the kindness and generous love of God our savior." "Appearance," of course, is a key Christmas word, inasmuch as God and everything about him is manifested in the birth of his Son. But the epiphany depicted here has to do with God. However, Jesus Christ is the visible manifestation of God's saving and merciful activity.

Mass during the Day. The Gospel reading for Mass during the Day is the earliest Gospel reading we know of

which was assigned to a Mass for the Nativity of the Lord. Taken together with the Collect of the Mass, the Johannine Prologue characterizes this celebration as one of the Incarnation. The enfleshment of the Divine, Preexistent Word of God, who is light that dispels a powerful darkness, is also the source of a new creation of the world, in whose original creation he had a part.

Hebrews 1:1-6 depicts Jesus as the visible manifestation of God's creative and salvific word. The author compares the definitive word spoken in the Christ event to the provisional words of the prophets. The author abruptly moves from the image of Christ just mentioned to his redemptive mission, described in priestly terms as "purification." Having accomplished this purpose, he takes his "seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high." Again, we have a cultic image here of the high priest entering the Holy of Holies to fulfill his priestly obligations. The author may have in mind a passage such as Isaiah 55:10-11: "Yet just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down And do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, Giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats, So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me empty, but shall do what pleases me, achieving the end for which I sent it."

The Christmas "Nativity Scene"

Where is it to be placed? "If the manger is set up in



the church, it must not be placed in the presbyterium. A place should be chosen that is suitable for prayer and devotion and is easily accessible by the faithful" (*Book of Blessings* # 1544).

When is it to be blessed? "The Blessing

of the Christmas manger or nativity scene, according to pastoral circumstances, may take place on the Vigil of Christmas or at another more suitable time." The *Ordo* specifies "a more suitable time" as "during another service, e. g., a service of lessons and carols" or during a celebration of the word of God.

The Order of Blessing within Mass takes place at the end of the Universal Prayer (General Intercessions) and has appropriate intercessions to accompany the ritual.

Feast of the Holy Family

Pope Saint John Paul II, in a homily dated Sunday, 31 December 1978



reflects on the Holy Family as follows:

"The family of Nazareth, which the Church, especially in today's liturgy, puts before the eyes of all families, really constitutes that culminating point of reference for the holiness of every human family. The history of this Family is described very concisely in the pages of the Gospel. We get to know only a few events in its life. However what we learn is sufficient to be able to involve the fundamental moments in the life of every family, and to show that dimension, to which all men who live a family life are called: fathers, mothers, parents, children, The Gospel shows us, very clearly, the educative aspect of the family. 'He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them' (Lk 2:51)."

Choice of Readings: A set of readings is given for Cycle B, however, the Cycle A readings may also be used.

Order for the Blessing of Families and Members of Families: This feast provides an appropriate occasion to use the "Order for the Blessing of A

Family," *Book of Blessings* ##62-67. The rite of blessing is in the form of the Universal Prayer with intercessions appropriate to the liturgy and with the concluding prayer serving as the prayer of blessing.

Solemnity of Mary, Mother of God January 1, 2021



Obligation and Masses: January 1, 2021 is a Friday, therefore this year the Solemnity of Mary the Mother of God is a Holyday of Obligation, unless the current diocesan COVID-19 dispensation remains intact.

January 1 is also recognized as the World Day of Prayer for Peace, first declared by Pope Paul VI. Pope Francis usually publishes reflection for this observance in advance of the day.

Solemnity of the Epiphany of our Lord



Date: Traditionally situated on January 6th, in the United States the solemnity is commuted to the Sunday between January 1 and the Feast of the Lord's Baptism.

Choice of Mass: While there is only one set of readings for this solemnity, the Roman Missal provides a specific set of prayers for an anticipated (vigil) Mass.

Eucharistic Prayer: As is the case with Christmas, a special form of the *Communicantes* for the Epiphany is included in Eucharistic Prayer I. Eucharistic Prayers II-IV, however, may be used.

Proclamation: In Appendix I of the

Roman Missal is “The Announcement of Easter and the Moveable Feasts.” In accord with ancient tradition, this proclamation may be used at Mass on the Solemnity of the Epiphany. It may be done either after the Gospel reading or within the context of the homily and, if used, it is chanted by a deacon or cantor.

Wait, Don't Take Down the Christmas Decorations and Stop Singing Christmas Carols Just Yet!: Perhaps since in the liturgical calendar prior to its reform at Vatican II Epiphany marked the end of the Christmas season there is a temptation to stop celebrating the Christmas season. However, the liturgy should look and sound like Christmas through the feast of the Lord's Baptism.

Universal vs. Particular Calendars: In the Ecclesiastical Province of Louisiana Our Lady of Prompt Succor (January 8, 2021) is elevated to a solemnity, inasmuch as, under this title, Our Lady is the patroness of the State of Louisiana. The solemnity in the particular calendar, then, takes precedence over the universal calendar for January 8th, which in 2021 is Friday after Epiphany.

Masses for the Day: Mass may be taken from the Proper or Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary, especially no. III, or from the Collection of Masses of the Blessed Virgin Mary #42, “Our Lady, Help of Christians.



Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Culmination of the Christmas Season: the Christmas season ends with vespers on the afternoon of January 10, 2021, the Feast of the Lord's Baptism. This feast marks the transition between our



worship in the context of the Christmas mystery and our liturgical encounter of Jesus Christ in his public ministry.

The Gospel reading for this feast in Cycle B is Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. The passage begins with the Baptist characterizing his mission as preparatory to that of Jesus. If he wielded God's “might,” one mightier than he is coming after him. John images the disparity in greatness between himself and Jesus in terms of master-slave relations. Slaves are subservient to their masters, but John characterizes himself as even less than a slave to Jesus the Master. Also, John's water baptism was a baptism of repentance that was meant to prepare the people for the gift of the Holy Spirit which would come through Jesus. The two baptisms (of water and the Holy Spirit) compared here depicts a process of leaving behind the old sinful self (repentance) and become a new person (endowed with God's Spirit).

Reflection



From the womb of Mother Church, the incarnate Son of God is born anew this night. His name is Jesus, which means: “God saves”. The Father, eternal and infinite Love, has sent him into the world not to condemn the world but to save it (cf. Jn 3:17). The Father has given him to us with great mercy. He has given him to everyone. He has given him forever. The Son is born, like a small light flickering in the cold and darkness of the night.

That Child, born of the Virgin Mary, is the Word of God made flesh. The Word who guided Abraham's heart and steps towards the promised land, and who continues to draw to himself

all those who trust in God's promises. The Word who led the Hebrews on the journey from slavery to freedom and who continues to call the enslaved in every age, including our own, to come forth from their prisons. He is the Word brighter than the sun, made incarnate in a tiny son of man: Jesus the light of the world.

May the Son of God, come down to earth from heaven, protect and sustain all those who, due to these and other injustices, are forced to emigrate in the hope of a secure life. It is injustice that makes them cross deserts and seas that become cemeteries. It is injustice that forces them to endure unspeakable forms of abuse, enslavement of every kind and torture in inhumane detention camps. It is injustice that turns them away from places where they might have hope for a dignified life, but instead find themselves before walls of indifference.

May Emmanuel bring light to all the suffering members of our human family. May he soften our often stony and self-centred hearts, and make them channels of his love. May he bring his smile, through our poor faces, to all the children of the world: to those who are abandoned and those who suffer violence. Through our frail hands, may he clothe those who have nothing to wear, give bread to the hungry and heal the sick. Through our friendship, such as it is, may he draw close to the elderly and the lonely, to migrants and the marginalized. On this joyful Christmas Day, may he bring his tenderness to all and brighten the darkness of this world.

--Pope Francis, excerpt from *Urbi et Orbi*, Christmas 2019.