

Advent is a season of new beginnings

As we begin a new liturgical year and also the season of Advent, here is a short quiz:

1) Do you know the new beginning and the end of the liturgical year?

2) Do you know why the Church's liturgical calendar is different from the calendar year?

The answer to the first question is easy: The Church's year begins with the First Sunday of Advent (Dec. 2 this year) and ends at the 34th Week in Ordinary Time. At the same time, in accordance with the three-year cycle of Scripture readings, we move from Cycle B (Gospel of Mark) to Cycle C (Gospel of Luke).

The answer to the second question is a little more complicated, but absolutely essential to our spiritual understanding. The structure of the liturgical calendar helps us celebrate and understand the spiritual significance of the mysteries of Christ as we journey through the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter and Ordinary Time.



FR. YAW ACHEAMPONG

A unique feature of the liturgical calendar is the transition from one year to another. The last Sunday (34th Sunday in Ordinary Time) of a liturgical year is celebrated as the Solemnity of Christ the King, reminding us of our call to reflect on the deeper meaning of God's Kingdom — "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace."

This transition invites us to reflect on the deeper understanding of God's Kingdom in our lives and on our response to the call of building up a kingdom of "justice and peace" in our communities.

As we begin a new journey on the first day of a new liturgical year, we may make some "New Year" life-affirming resolutions to improve on our spiritual relationship with God and our neighbour.

In the Toronto area, this journey is given special significance in archdiocese's "Pastoral Plan," inviting us "to reflect on our role as stewards of God's many gifts, calling us to a profound inner conversion that leads us to a spirit of generosity, most fully revealed in the sharing of time and talent with others." In the realm of spirituality, this Advent season can be a starting point for us to reflect on how we are responding to the call to stewardship. We can examine the many ways by which we may use the gifts of time, talent and treasure that God has given us in building up His kingdom.

The season of Advent shares some features with the season of Lent — the penitential nature characterized by the purple/violet colour of the vestments, the omission of Gloria at Sunday Mass

and the moderation of the use of flowers around the altar. The penitential nature of Advent invites us to embark on our Advent "discipline" as a means of reflecting on the state of our discipleship.

Every baptized person is called into stewardship by joyfully and faithfully using the gifts entrusted to him or her by our Lord "according to his or her ability." Stewardship helps build others up in our faith communities. To be able to live as grateful and fruitful stewards, we are called to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit so that He may lead us to repentance, renewal and transformation of our lives.

"Stewardship calls for nothing less than both individual and communal conversion, rooted in faith and fruitful in action," Cardinal Thomas Collins wrote in a pastoral letter on stewardship.

The season of Advent is a time to reflect on the hope, joy, peace and love that comes with Jesus born Emmanuel (God with us). It is a new beginning to reflect and to renew our commitment to love

God and to love neighbour as self. This year we can use Advent as a time to reflect on how we can best share our gifts of talent, time and treasure in our parishes.

Just like the rest of the population, we tend to relate Advent to Christmas and are tempted to focus our attention on the celebration of Christmas — shopping, putting lights around the house, planning for parties. However, as people of faith, we need to understand the season of Advent in a manner different from the view of the world.

Stewardship clearly has a meaning that is important for Christian life, a way of commitment to our baptismal promises. Reflecting on the meaning of stewardship as a way of life, and turning thoughts into action, is a perfect way to celebrate this Advent season.

We wish you all a blessed new Church year.

(Fr. Acheampong is the pastor of Our Lady of Peace Parish in Toronto.)

Families mix a blend of party and parish

BY JEAN KO DIN
The Catholic Register

As Christmas becomes more and more commercialized, parents like Robin Bredin are looking to the local parish for opportunities to show his children that Jesus is at the core of the celebration.

"It's about going beyond the commercial aspect of it," he said. "Without the aspect of faith, you're missing the colour, the fourth dimension, the spirituality of life."

Every year, St. Patrick's Parish in downtown Toronto hosts a Santa Claus parade after-party to kick off their Advent celebrations. After braving a cold Nov. 18 Sunday morning watching the parade, families were welcomed with hot chocolate and a hotdog.

"In many ways, the vision for Catholic life is the relationship between the parish, the church and the school and in many ways, the church is that community centre," said Sarah Miller, the parish's lay pastoral minister who organized the outreach event. "Parents are considered the primary catechist and so, if we can nurture that relationship to explore religious life as a family, that's part of our mission."

The parade after-party is part of a family outreach program that St. Patrick's hosts once a month.



Above, Emily Meehan paints a winter theme for Vittoria Russo at St. Patrick's Parish. Right, Laura Dee gives her daughter Mimi a hug before they get down to decorating a gingerbread man. (Photos by Jean Ko Din)

Miller and a group of volunteers set up fun activity stations for both parents and kids.

There were stations for Advent wreath making, cookie decorating, face painting and a mini-petting zoo with the parish office's guinea pigs, Patty and Alfie. Classic Christmas shows, like *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, were also playing in the background.

Miller said the point of this ministry is to empower the parents to be the primary catechists for their children.

"It's about the parents that come to the table and do the activities together," said Miller. "They

can be listening to the volunteers and the catechists talk about the activities and they can reinforce those lessons at home."

"We've been coming here since (my kids) were two. It's like a family tradition," said Laura Dee, mother of twin six-year-old girls, Mimi and Zizou. "Church is a place for community and gathering. I grew up like that and I want them to know church is for everyone."

Dee said both her girls are active in their Catholic school, but she is also grateful there is a ministry at St. Patrick's that helps show her children that the faith is more than just sacraments — it's also for community life.

