

Lighting candles on our path to Christmas

How are you preparing for Christmas?

When our churches were re-opened in June with COVID-19 safety protocols for churches in place, we hoped that the pandemic would be over by now so we could celebrate the Advent and Christmas seasons as we always have.

Unfortunately, while the Christmas decorations with cheerful red, green and gold lights are appearing in stores and homes, the increasing numbers of infections of the virus across the country means there will be no in-person participation in many activities we associate with the season, like the Santa Claus parade, the *Nutcracker* ballet and the *Messiah* concert. These joyful events usually serve as markers to lead us into the Christmas spirit.

So, as Christians, how are we going to prepare for Christmas in this pandemic?

The Church's new liturgical year (Year B) begins with the First Sunday of Advent on Nov. 29. We begin our faith journey through four Sundays to prepare for Christmas.

Due to Advent's penitential nature, traditionally we embark



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on Advent "discipline" focused on our preparation to celebrate Christmas. But Advent is also our time of preparation for the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the ages.

In the Roman Missal, the Prayer of Praise, Preface 1 of Advent, we hear about the Second Coming of Christ when the celebrant reads: "When He comes again in glory and majesty and is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which we dare to hope." The reality of this great promise remains the same even in the time of pandemic.

The twofold nature of Advent means that we need to take into consideration how we live so as to prepare for Christmas and also to be mindful of the teaching of Jesus,



Volunteers at St. Brigid's Parish in Toronto started their Advent journey by assembling the Nativity scene in front of the church. Below, one of the construction crew carefully places the Virgin Mary in front of the Christ child. (Photos, including cover photo, by Michael Swan)

"to keep alert for you do not know when the master of the house will come" (Mark 13,33-37). The spirituality of the two comings of Christ calls us to embrace holiness.

In his apostolic exhortation, "On The Call to Holiness in Today's World" (*Gaudete et Exsultate*), Pope Francis writes: "We need a spirit of holiness capable both of our solitude and our service, our personal life and our evangelizing efforts, so that every moment can be an expression of self-sacrificing love in the Lord's eyes. In this way, every minute of our lives can be a step along the path to growth in holiness" (31).

How do we start on this path? We can begin with the examination of our ongoing relationship with God and neighbour, and how we might transform our ways to become closer to God and neighbour.

There is no doubt that the pandemic will have an impact on our Advent spirit. In our parishes, many activities we associate with the celebration of Advent and Christmas — the Advent bazaar and bake sale, Christmas concert, Christmas pageant and Advent retreat — are cancelled. Yet, we can be creative in making the celebration of Advent more meaningful to us.

The traditional spiritual exercises are still available to us. We can start to pray often, to reflect on Scripture readings for the day's Mass, to be patient and to learn to reach out to those in need



through the parishes' outreach programs. We can do something that we might have not done in a while — send a Christmas card by regular mail.

In his latest encyclical, "On Fraternity and Social Friendship" (*Fratelli Tutti*), Pope Francis "invites everyone to renewed hope that speaks to us of something deeply rooted in every heart, independently of our circumstances and historical conditioning" (55). Our invitation to renewed hope is what Advent is about.

In our current climate, keeping ourselves and others safe, showing concern for the other and showing gratitude to those who care for us are all activities based on our faith. They are all activities that bring us closer to God and to each other and help us grow in charity.

As we begin Advent, we still have our Advent wreath with the candles symbolizing that the light of Christ lights our path on the journey to Christmas. At Christmas, we shall have our beautiful Christmas trees in our churches and at home to remind us that "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2) in the birth of Jesus Christ.

As children of light, Advent is the time for us to reach out to all in love. Advent is the time for us to come together united in God's love so that we may all experience the joy, the hope and the love that comes with Christmas.

Have a spirit-filled Advent journey.

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

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