

DIRECTORY ON POPULAR PIETY AND THE LITURGY

Congregation for Divine Worship
and the Discipline of the Sacraments

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PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES:

In Advent

96. Advent is a time of waiting, conversion and of hope:

- ✧ waiting-memory of the first, humble coming of the Lord in our mortal flesh; waiting-supplication for his final, glorious coming as Lord of History and universal Judge;
- ✧ conversion, to which the Liturgy at this time often refers quoting the prophets, especially John the Baptist, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 3,2);
- ✧ joyful hope that the salvation already accomplished by Christ (cf. Rm 8, 24-25) and the reality of grace in the world, will mature and reach their fulness, thereby granting us what is promised by faith, and “we shall become like him for we shall see him as he really is” (John 3,2).

97. Popular piety is particularly sensitive to Advent, especially when seen as the memory of the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Christian people are deeply conscious of the long period of expectation that preceded the birth of our Saviour. The faithful know that God sustained Israel’s hope in the coming of the Messiah by the prophets.

Popular piety is not unaware of this extraordinary event. Indeed, it is awe-struck at the prospect of the God of glory taking flesh in the womb of the humble and lowly Virgin Mary. The faithful are particularly sensitive to the difficulties faced by the Virgin Mary during her pregnancy, and are deeply moved by the fact that there was no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary, just as she was about to give birth to the Christ child (cf Lk 2,7).

Various expressions of popular piety connected with Advent have emerged throughout the centuries. These have sustained the faith of the people, and from one generation to the next, they have conserved many valuable aspects of the liturgical season of Advent.

The Advent Wreath

98. Placing four candles on green fronds has become a symbol of Advent in many Christian home, especially in the Germanic countries and in North America.

The Advent wreath, with the progressive lighting of its four candles, Sunday after Sunday, until the Solemnity of Christmas, is a recollection of the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ’s coming and a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating

the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf. Mt 3,20; Lk 1,78).

Advent processions

99. In many regions, various kinds of processions are held in Advent, publicly to announce the imminent birth of the Saviour (the “day star” in some Italian processions), or to represent the journey to Bethlehem of Joseph and Mary and their search for a place in which Jesus would be born (the *posadas* in the Hispanic and Latin American tradition).

The Winter Interstice

100. Advent is celebrated during the Winter interstice in the northern hemisphere. This indicates a change of seasons and a moment of rest in many spheres of human endeavour. Popular piety is extremely sensitive to the vital cycle of nature. While the Winter interstice is celebrated, the seed lies in the ground waiting for the light and heat of the sun, which begins its ascent with the Winter solstice, and eventually causes it to germinate.

In those areas where popular piety has given rise to the celebration of the changing season, such expressions should be conserved and used as a time to pray the Lord, to reflect on the meaning of human work, which is a collaboration with the creative work of God, a self-realisation of the person, service to the common good, and an actualization of the plan of redemption(114).

The Blessed Virgin Mary and Advent

The Liturgy frequently celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary in an exemplary way during the season of Advent(115). It recalls the women of the Old Testament who prefigured and prophesied her mission; it exalts her faith and the humility with which she promptly and totally submitted to God’s plan of salvation; it highlights her presence in the events of grace preceding the birth of the Saviour. Popular piety also devotes particular attention to the Blessed Virgin Mary during Advent, as is evident from the many pious exercises practised at this time, especially the novena of the Immaculate Conception and of Christmas.

However, the significance of Advent, “that time which is particularly apt for the cult of the Mother of God”(116), is such that it cannot be represented merely as a “Marian month”.

In the calendars of the Oriental Churches, the period of preparation for the celebration of the manifestation (Advent) of divine salvation (Theophany) in the mysteries of Christmas-Epiphany of the Only Son of God, is markedly Marian in character. Attention is concentrated on preparation for the Lord’s coming in the *Deipara*. For the Orientals, all Marian mysteries are Christological mysteries since they refer to the mystery of our salvation in Christ. In the Coptic rite, the Lauds of the Virgin Mary are sung in the *Theotokia*. Among the Syrians, Advent is referred to as the *Subbara* or *Annunciation*, so as to highlight its Marian character. The Byzantine Rite prepares for Christmas with a whole series of Marian feasts and rituals.

102. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is profoundly influential among the faithful, is an occasion for many displays of popular piety and especially for the novena of the Immaculate Conception. There can be no doubt that the feast of the pure and sinless Conception of the Virgin Mary, which is a fundamental preparation for the Lord's coming into the world, harmonizes perfectly with many of the salient themes of Advent. This feast also makes reference to the long messianic waiting for the Saviour's birth and recalls events and prophecies from the Old Testament, which are also used in the Liturgy of Advent.

The novena of the Immaculate Conception, wherever it is celebrated, should highlight the prophetic texts which begin with Genesis 3,15, and end in Gabriel's salutation of the one who is "full of grace" (Lk 1, 31-33).

The approach of Christmas is celebrated throughout the American continent with many displays of popular piety, centred on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (12 December), which dispose the faithful to receive the Saviour at his birth. Mary, who was "intimately united with the birth of the Church in America, became the radiant Star illuminating the proclamation of Christ the Saviour to the sons of these nations" (117).

The Christmas Novena

103. The Christmas novena began as a means of communicating the riches of the Liturgy to the faithful who were unable easily to grasp it. It has played a very effective role and can continue to

play such a role. At the same time, in current conditions where the faithful have easier access to the Liturgy, it would seem desirable that vespers from the 17-23 of December should be more solemn by adopting the use of the "major antiphons", and by inviting the faithful to participate at the celebration. Such a celebration, held either before or after which the popular devotions to which the faithful are particularly attached, would be an ideal "Christmas novena", in full conformity with the Liturgy and mindful of the needs of the faithful. Some elements, such as the homily, the use of incense, and the intercessions, could also be expanded within the celebration of Vespers.

The Crib

104. As is well known, in addition to the representations of the crib found in churches since antiquity, the custom of building cribs in the home was widely promoted from the thirteenth century, influenced undoubtedly by St. Francis of Assisi's crib in Greccio. Their preparation, in which children play a significant role, is an occasion for the members of the family to come into contact with the mystery of Christmas, as they gather for a moment of prayer or to read the biblical accounts of the Lord's birth.

Popular Piety and the Spirit of Advent

105. Popular piety, because of its intuitive understanding of the Christian mystery, can contribute effectively to the conservation of many of the values of Advent, which are not infrequently threatened by the commercialization of Christmas and consumer superficiality.

Popular piety perceives that it is impossible to celebrate the Lord's birth except in an atmosphere of sobriety and joyous simplicity and of concern for the poor and imarginated. The expectation of the Lord's birth makes us sensitive to the value of life and the duties to respect and defend it from conception. Popular piety intuitively understands that it is not possible coherently to celebrate the birth of him "who saves his people from their sins" without some effort to overcome sin in one's own life, while waiting vigilantly for Him who will return at the end of time.

Christmastide

106. During Christmastide, the Church celebrates the mystery of the Lord's manifestation: his humble birth in Bethlehem which was made known to the shepherds, the first of Israel to welcome the Saviour; the Epiphany to the three wise men who had "come from the East" (Mt 2,1), the first of the Gentiles who recognised and adored Christ the Messiah in the child of Bethlehem; the theophany at the river Jordan in which the Father declares that Jesus is His "well-beloved Son" (Mt 3, 17) at the outset of his messianic mission; the miracle of Cana in which Jesus "manifested his glory and his disciples believed in him" (John 2,11).

107. In addition to these celebrations recalling the primary meaning of Christmas, there are also other celebrations closely connected with the mystery of the Lord's manifestation: the martyrdom of the Holy Innocents (28 December) whose blood was shed because of hatred for Jesus and because of Herod's rejection of his lordship; the memorial of

the Holy Name of Jesus, 13 January; the feast of the Holy Family (Sunday in the octave of Christmas) celebrating the holy family in which Jesus "grew in wisdom and grace before God and men" (Lk 2, 52); the solemnity of the 1E January which recalls the divine, virginal and salvific motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and, although outside of Christmastide, the feast of the Presentation of the Lord (2 February), celebrating the encounter between the Messiah and his people, represented by Simeon and Anna, and the prophecy of Simeon.

108. Much of the richness and complexity of the mystery of the Lord's manifestation is reflected in displays of popular piety, which is especially sensitive to the childhood of Christ which reveals his love for us. Popular piety intuitively grasps:

- ✧ the importance of the "spirituality of gift", which is proper to Christmas: "a child is born for us, a son is given to us" (cf. Is 9, 5), a gift expressing the infinite love of God, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3, 16);
- ✧ the message of solidarity conveyed by the event of Christmas: solidarity with sinful man, for whom, in Christ, God became man "for us men and for our salvation"(118); solidarity with the poor, because the Son of God "who" was rich but became poor for your sake, to make you rich out of your poverty" (2 Cor 8, 9);
- ✧ the sacredness of human life and the wonderful event that is every birth, since the Word of

life came amongst men and was made visible through his birth of the Virgin Mary (cf. 1 John 1, 2);

- ✧ the messianic joy and peace to which man has aspired in every age: the Angels announce the birth of the Saviour of the world to the shepherds, the “Prince of Peace (Is 9.5) and proclaim “peace on earth to men of good will” (Lk 2, 14);
- ✧ the spirit of simplicity and poverty, humility and trust in God, suggested by the events surrounding the birth of Christ.

Popular piety, precisely because it can intuit the values inherent in the mystery of Christ’s birth, is called upon to cooperate in preserving the memory of the manifestation of the Lord, so as to ensure that the strong religious tradition surrounding Christmas is not secularized by consumerism or the infiltration of various forms of neopaganism.

Christmas Eve

109. In the space of time between the first Vespers of Christmas and Midnight Mass, both the tradition of Christmas carols, which are potent means of conveying the Christmas message of peace and joy, and popular piety propose certain forms of prayers, differing from country to country, which should be cherished and, where necessary, made consonant with the celebration of the Liturgy: These would include:

- ✧ “live cribs” and the inauguration of the crib in the homes of the faithful which is an opportunity for family prayer: this prayer should include a read-

ing of St. Luke’s account of the birth of Christ, the typical Christmas carols, as well as prayers of petition and praise, especially those of children who are the protagonists in such family moments;

- ✧ the inauguration of the Christmas tree. This event also offers an opportunity for family prayer. Apart from its historical origins, the Christmas tree has become a potent symbol to-day and is very diffuse amongst Christians; it evokes both the tree planted in the centre of Eden (Gen 2, 9), and the tree of the Cross, which lends it a Christological significance: Christ is the true tree of life, born of human stock, of the Virgin Mary, the tree which is always green and productive. In the Nordic countries, the tree is decorated with apples and hosts. “Gifts” can be added; but among the gifts placed under the tree, something should be included for the poor since they belong to every Christian family;
- ✧ the Christmas supper. The Christian family, which traditionally blesses the table and gives thanks to the Lord for the gift of food, performs this ceremony with greater intensity at the Christmas supper which gives potent concrete expression to the joy of family ties.

110. Where possible, the Church desires that the faithful should prepare for the celebration of Midnight Mass on the 24 December with the Office of Readings

(119). Where such is not possible, it may be opportune to arrange a vigil of hymns, readings, and elements drawn from popular piety.

111. At Midnight Mass, an event of major liturgical significance and of strong resonance in popular piety, the following could be given prominence:

- ✧ at the beginning of Mass, the proclamation of the Saviour's birth according the formula contained in the Roman Martyrology could be made in song;
- ✧ the prayer of the faithful should really be universal, and where appropriate, use several languages; and the poor should always be remembered in the presentation of the gifts;
- ✧ at the end of Mass, the faithful could be invited to kiss the image of the Child Jesus, which is then placed in a crib erected in the church or somewhere nearby.

The Feast of the Holy Family

112. The feast of the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph (Sunday in the Christmas octave) is a festive occasion particularly suitable for the celebration of rites or moments of prayer proper to the Christian family. The recollection of Joseph, Mary and Jesus' going up to Jerusalem, together with other observant Jewish families, for the celebration of the Passover (cf. Lk 2, 41-42), should normally encourage a positive acceptance of the pastoral suggestion that all members of the family attend Mass on this day. This feast day also affords an opportunity for the renewal of our entrustment to the patronage of the Holy

Family of Nazareth(120); the blessing of children as provided in the ritual(121); and where opportune, for the renewal of marriage vows taken by the spouses on their wedding day, and also for the exchange of promises between those engaged to be married in which they formalize their desire to found a new Christian family(122).

Outside of the feast, the faithful have frequent recourse to the Holy Family of Nazareth in many of life's circumstances: joining the Association of the Holy Family so as to model their own families on the Holy Family of Nazareth(123); frequent prayers to entrust themselves to the patronage of the Holy Family and to obtain assistance at the hour of death(124).

The Feast of the Holy Innocents

113. Since the sixth century, on 28 December, the Church has celebrated the memory of those children killed because of Herod's rage against Christ (cf. Mt 2, 16-17). Liturgical tradition refers to them as the "Holy Innocents" and regards them as martyrs. Throughout the centuries Christian art, poetry and popular piety have enfolded the memory of the "tender flock of lambs"(125) with sentiments of tenderness and sympathy. These sentiments are also accompanied by a note of indignation against the violence with which they were taken from their mothers' arms and killed.

In our own times, children suffer innumerable forms of violence which threaten their lives, dignity and right to education. On this day, it is appropriate to recall the vast host of children not yet born who have been killed under the

cover of laws permitting abortion, which is an abominable crime. Mindful of these specific problems, popular piety in many places has inspired acts of worship as well as displays of charity which provide assistance to pregnant mothers, encourage adoption and the promotion of the education of children.