



Finding God®

Our Response to God's Gifts

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Special seasonal issue by Jane Knuth

The Advent Prayer List

True Stories of How Families Pray During Advent



Make Advent a Season of Prayer

Children may find it hard to recognize Jesus underneath the glitter and sugar of Christmas. Our young ones can find the presents under the tree, but unless we add prayer to Advent they may only see our love, not the love of God. But who has time for family prayer during the busy Advent season?

In the book *The Prayer List . . . and Other True Stories of How Families Pray*, I collected more than 50 family prayer stories. In this issue, you will read about four families

and how they pray together during Advent. Sometimes the prayers

are not words, but actions. Especially with young children, lighting candles, giving

secret gifts, setting

up a Christmas tree, and

singing can be the best way to pray. All we need is a bubble of joy and a tiny bit of courage to unwrap this easy-difficult thing called family prayer. ✚



The Christmas Tree

Kevin grew up on a farm, the eighth in a family of eleven children. Their traditions around Advent and Christmas followed the classic German ones of his mother: an Advent wreath, delicious baked goods, and a Christmas tree.

With eleven children, Kevin's mom didn't have the time to put up the tree on Christmas Eve (the German tradition), nor a room in the house to dedicate much space to it, so she always placed it on a table. Kevin recalls, "I thought we had an enormous tree, but now that I think about it, it just looked tall because of the table under it. And putting it up was one of my favorite

parts of Advent." It would all begin, surprisingly, in the middle of summer.

"Our Christmas tree was cut right on the farm. All during the year, when we did our chores in the fields, we kids would keep a lookout for the best trees and show them to each other, weighing the merits of each: Was it too tall? Too wide? Did it have a flat side? Were there plenty of branches for the ornaments? It was something we had in the back of our minds most of the warm months—which tree this year?"

A couple of weeks into Advent, the oldest brother would lead the younger kids out to the fields with the tree saw balanced on his shoulder. Meanwhile, at home, Mom was baking cinnamon rolls with icing and heating up mugs of hot cocoa. The chosen tree was hauled home across the snowy fields, and Dad set it up on the table while the kids went to work decorating the cinnamon rolls with colored sprinkles. After everyone was fed and warmed up, did they decorate the tree?

"Oh, no," says Kevin. "We were told that the branches had to sit awhile to relax, so decorating was saved for the following day. The last thing we did was pray the Rosary together. The prayers were part of the wonderful day: it all went together." ■





Oplátky, Blessings, Hymns, and Healing Traditions

Barb's parents came to the United States in 1950 and brought with them many Polish Catholic customs. As she grew older, she realized why her family so loyally kept them.

During Advent, our father, the organist at Our Lady Queen of Apostles in Hamtramck, Michigan, went door to door selling packages of the Christmas wafers, *opłatki*, to parishioners. In Poland it was the organist who baked and distributed the



wafers, but here my dad bought them from a distributor. *Oplátky* are made of flour and water and baked in a three-by-seven-inch sheet stamped with a Christmas scene. They are as thin as the hosts used in Mass, taste much the same, and are very delicate looking.

After school each day, my brother, sister, and I would put the *opłatki* (three white and one pink—the colored one to decorate the tree) with a prayer card, into Christmas envelopes. We averaged about thirty to fifty each day and sometimes we would hope for a broken wafer so we could eat them!

At the Polish Christmas Eve dinner called *wigilia* (vigil), an extra place at the table is set to welcome Jesus, a hungry traveler, or a deceased relative. Dinner begins with the parents breaking their *opłatek* in half and sharing it with each other along with wishes for good health, happiness, and prosperity in the new

year. Next, Dad goes around the table offering small pieces of his wafer to other family members who, in turn, share small bits of their wafers. Blessings and good wishes are sent around the room in this way along with forgiveness and prayer for the future.

Afterward the family attends midnight Mass where Polish Christmas carols are sung in church. Since our dad was the organist, we are fortunate to have recordings of his choir which we play now during our *wigilia* celebration each year. The first Mass in the morning for my dad was at 6 a.m., followed by eight, ten, and noon. After 10 a.m. my mom and us kids brought cookies, gingerbread, walnut torte, cakes, coffee, and alcohol shots for the choir of thirty people. For years, our entire family was there for the choir party, even after we were married and had children.

You may wonder why my parents kept up this elaborate tradition for more than fifty years.

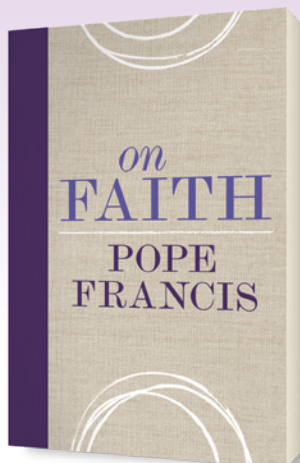
In 1939, Dad was nineteen years old and the organist at the Church of the Visitation of Mary in Krakow, Poland. The Nazi occupation was in full force, and all the organists in the country were given a list of forbidden hymns. These included any that might be considered nationalistic or particularly Catholic. One day, a feast of the Blessed Mother, my dad ignored the order and played *Bogurodzica*, a hymn from the Middle Ages honoring Mary. This was one of the most forbidden pieces of music because Polish knights were known to have sung it before entering battle. Dad was arrested and spent the remainder of the war in Auschwitz. For all those years he was known as number 6617. My mom was sent to a forced work camp where she labored as a slave during the war. Their names were Wladyslaw and Jadwiga Budweil. ■



A Faith That Transforms

Read the inspiring words of Pope Francis to discover the transforming power of faith. Drawing on examples of faith from the Old and New Testaments, as well as examples from his own life of faith at work in the world, Pope Francis demonstrates that faith, like hope, is rooted in love. ■

On Faith by Pope Francis (Loyola Press, 2019).



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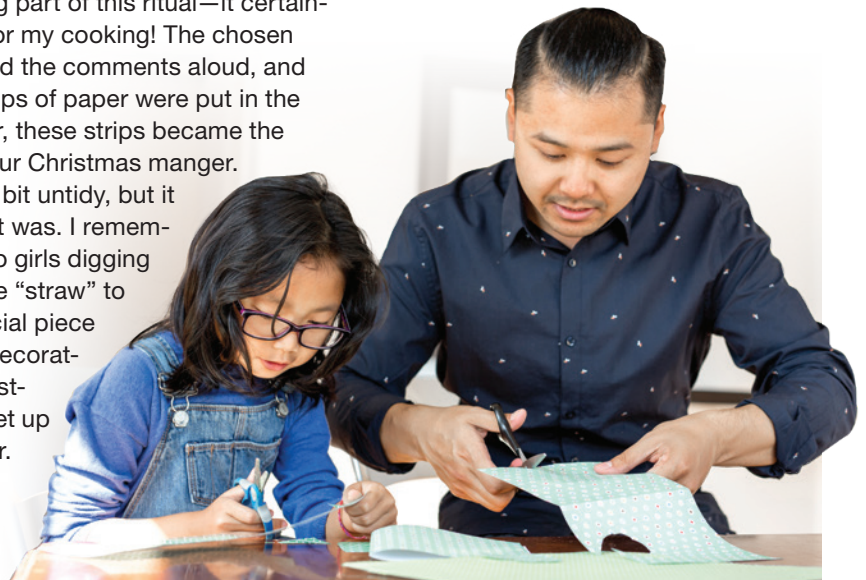
Straws of Kindness

My good friend and mentor, Midge, wrote to me about their family Advent tradition. She is one of the featured “elders” in Loyola Press’ book *Sharing the Wisdom of Time* by Pope Francis.

For many years, during the weeks leading up to Christmas, we had a bowl sitting in the middle of the Advent wreath along with little strips of blank paper. As part of our evening meal prayer, each of us at the table would take a piece of paper and the person whose turn it was that evening had to write something they were thankful for that day. The other people at the table wrote something positive about the chosen person. If we had a guest, that person was naturally the chosen person. And, for some reason we always had extra guests during Advent. I think the kids’ friends dropped by at mealtime just because they enjoyed being part of this ritual—it certainly wasn’t for my cooking! The chosen person read the comments aloud, and then the slips of paper were put in the bowl. Later, these strips became the “straw” in our Christmas manger. It looked a bit untidy, but it was what it was. I remember our two girls digging through the “straw” to find a special piece when we decorated for Christmas and set up the manger.

I wish I had saved all those strips. The only one I remember is when one daughter commented to the other that her zit looked better! The most precious part of this tradition was that it made us verbalize what we valued in one another.

Simple, untidy . . . but it was a family tradition for years. I’m remembering some of the frequent guests around the table as I write this, and I’m smiling to myself about the years when I always cooked for at least five because someone inevitably would drop by. ■



FAMILY ACTIVITY: *Affirmations*

Your family doesn’t need to set up an Advent wreath or a manger to begin this beautiful tradition of affirming one another. A pretty bowl in the middle of the table will work fine, and the “straw” can easily be made from bright Christmas paper and scattered about on the table on Christmas morning for decoration.

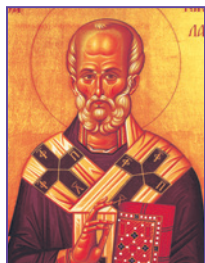




St. Nicholas Day, December 6

Karen Williams writes about how her family of young boys learned to imitate a saint and have a blast doing it.

Saint Nicholas was born around A.D. 270 in what is now known as Turkey.



He was a generous bishop who loved children and those in need and was known for secretly leaving gifts outside people's doors. When I was a child, my father would

slip away after dinner on December 6, and then "Saint Nicholas" would throw a bag of candy against the front door. While my siblings and I were digging into the bag, our dad would reappear.

When my husband and I married, had children, and tried to blend our family traditions, we soon realized that the bag of candy hitting the door wasn't right for

us and our four young sons. In the spirit of Saint Nicholas, we needed a new way to show unselfish generosity.

In the spirit of Saint Nicholas, we needed a new way to show unselfish generosity.

On Thanksgiving, the year our boys were 4, 8, 9, and 11 years old, we secretly drew names with this assignment: do an act of service for that person on December 6. We decided on some rules: the gift should not cost any money, and second, it should be done in secret. We discovered that these two simple rules increased our awareness of what others in our family might need and taught us the joy of giving in secret. Even the youngest of our sons, with just a little help from a parent, loved to participate.

I smile remembering the six of us sneaking around to surprise each other: the

youngest son found his bed made with his stuffed animals lined up on either side of the pillow; another's school lunch was made for him and included the Thanksgiving turkey wishbone; a last piece of Halloween candy was shared; a Saturday morning chore to clean the bathroom was completed; a cup of tea ready; a breakfast prepared; a table cleared and a jigsaw puzzle set up.

One year, I found my own bed made and a short poem handwritten with new cursive skills:

"I couldn't think of much to do, so I hope this is enough for you!

Hope you have fun, 'cause I gotta run . . ."

Another year, alongside a teenage son's pencil sketch of a candle burning bright was a note: "St. Nicholas Day—A day for the wise, the witty, and the loving . . . To live in knowledge of one's own great efforts rewarded not by gift or treasure, but the existence of a feeling warmer than the coziest hearth . . ."

Our sons insisted on keeping the tradition until they left home. ■



A Season of Joy and Prayer

Advent is a time of secrets, fun, decorations, and remembering others, both the living and those who have passed. All those things can be part of family prayer as well. These stories may have inspired you to bring back an old family tradition like *oplatki* or to begin a new one like paper straw in the manger. Perhaps St. Nicholas Day will become your children's favorite part of Advent. I will not look at my Christmas tree the same way after reading Kevin's story. Putting it up, or taking it down, can be a prayer instead of a chore. May your Advent be full of joy and may it be tucked all around with prayer. ■