

Fourth Week of Advent

Blessing of a Christmas Tree

Loving God,
we ask you to bless this tree.
You created every kind of tree,
conifers, seed, and fruit-bearing trees,
providing us with food, shelter, and beauty.
May our tree's evergreen branches
remind us of your ever-present love for us.
On the tree of the cross
your Son won for us eternal life.
May these boughs, hung with ornaments,
remind us to be living branches,
bearing the fruit of good works.
You sent your Holy Spirit
to be our counselor, comforter, and guide.
May the lights on this tree
remind us of the Spirit's presence,
shining in our hearts. Amen.



December 21, 2008 *Holy Conversations*

Today's Gospel reading (Luke 1:26–38) tells of a remarkable conversation between a young Jewish woman and an angel. According to the Talmud (a collection of ancient Jewish teachings about the law), the angel Gabriel is made of fire. It is little wonder, then, that he tells Mary not to be afraid. After Gabriel delivers his message, Mary is perplexed and questions him, asking, "How can this be?" She not only hears his words, she ponders them, and then accepts the vocation to which she is called. Mary speaks to the angel with humility, but also with courage and honesty. The angel reassures her and responds to her questions, treating her with respect. Dominican theologian, Father Garrigou-Lagrange, OP, calls our inner life "an elevated form of intimate conversation which

everyone has with himself as soon as he is alone." When a person seriously begins to seek God, he suggests, this interior conversation tends to become a conversation with God. Clearly, Mary was accustomed to intimate interior conversation with God. She felt free to ask questions and to reflect on the words she was hearing.

When we are alone, with whom do we talk? Are we listening for God's call? God invites us into dialogue. The conversations we have with others influence our interior dialogue. Holy conversations can teach us to listen, ponder, and respond. Make room in your life for spiritual companions and holy conversations. Pray as a family that all might listen for God's call and respond to it as generously as Mary did.

This Week at Home

Monday, December 22 Make a Joyful Noise

Caroling is one of the most joyful traditions of Christmas. Make a family book of favorite carols to use throughout the Christmas season. Go to www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/ and select "Hymns and Carols." Words, tunes (played on MIDI, Musical Instrument Digital Interface), and musical scores are available. Print out the words of favorite carols and place in three-ring binders, so that new carols can be added each year. Let children, or the family artist, draw the illustrations.

Tuesday, December 23 Deck the Halls

Throughout the world, families are busy today, cleaning and decorating their homes for Christmas. Doorways are decorated with evergreen boughs, symbolizing eternal life. Poinsettia, known in Central America as the "flower of Holy Night," adorn the mantel, the Irish place candles in the windows to welcome the Holy Family, star ornaments are hung from the ceiling of Finnish dining rooms, and red lanterns decorate Japanese homes. This isn't a chore to get done, but a process to embrace. We prepare our homes as God prepares our hearts. Many children love this tradition, so make it a family project and keep it simple.



Wednesday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Christmas Eve supper is an important occasion in Christian households, traditionally combining abstinence from meat as a culinary prelude to the Christmas feast, family reunion, and joyous expectation. Make it simple, but special. Ukrainians enjoy Holy Supper, a meatless meal consisting of 12 traditional dishes, one to represent each of the 12 apostles. The Wilia Supper, or Festival of the Star, is traditional for Polish families who gather for dinner when the first star appears in the eastern skies. Some families set an extra place for absent loved ones, or in the hopes that Christ will come in the person of an unexpected guest.

Thursday, December 25 Nativity of the Lord

Christ, our Light, is come! Today we change the candles of our Advent wreath to white or place a Christ candle in

the center. Here is a blessing to say before your Christmas feast: *Gracious Lord, you have sent the light of Christ into the world. Let his light shine brightly in our home throughout this holy season. Bless our Christmas meal and the hands of those who prepared it. Bless all of us gathered here and our absent loved ones. As you have blessed us, may we be a blessing to all those in need. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Friday, December 26 Feast of Saint Stephen, the First Martyr

Saint Stephen was a deacon in the early Church and the first martyr of the New Testament (Acts 6–7). In medieval times, farm animals were blessed on this day and allowed a rest during the 12 days of Christmas. Pray this blessing prayer for your pets today: *Blessed are you, O God, who created every living creature. Bless and protect (name your pets) with health and happiness. You gave humankind dominion over the earth. Help us to treat all life with kindness and respect. Amen.*

Saturday, December 27 Feast of Saint John the Evangelist

Most of us are ready now for a quiet evening at home. Celebrate this feast by lighting lots of candles and reading the prologue to the Gospel according to Saint John, which describes Christ as the Light of the World. Give the traditional toast, "Drink the love of Saint John," with hot-spiced cider or mulled wine. (This is based on a legend that Saint John was once given a cup of poisoned wine, but was unharmed.)