



**WELCOMING  
CHILDREN  
in WORSHIP**

**THE CATHOLIC  
UNIVERSITY  
OF AMERICA**



A PROGRAM FUNDED BY LILLY ENDOWMENT INC.

# **Liturgical Formation of Children for Hispanic Families and Communities**

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**A liturgical formation resource for  
parents, pastors,  
catechists and teachers.**

## **ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS**

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## **Introduction**

**Welcome and thank you for your ministry that serves the liturgical formation of children for their participation in the Eucharist, the “source and summit of the Christian life.” We welcome you to this virtual community and hope you find this guided liturgical formation resource in English and Spanish a support to your ministry with children.**

**Here you will find reflections to guide children through the liturgical season of Advent with catechesis and children’s activities to prepare them to participate fully in the Advent and Christmas liturgies.**

**An introductory section highlights the Church’s liturgical calendar as the sacred time when children are led to encounter the Word of God and God’s presence and action in the world and in their lives.**

**In these sessions, we invite you to gather children around the table of the home or the table of the classroom as a preparation for their participation at the sacred table of the Eucharist.**

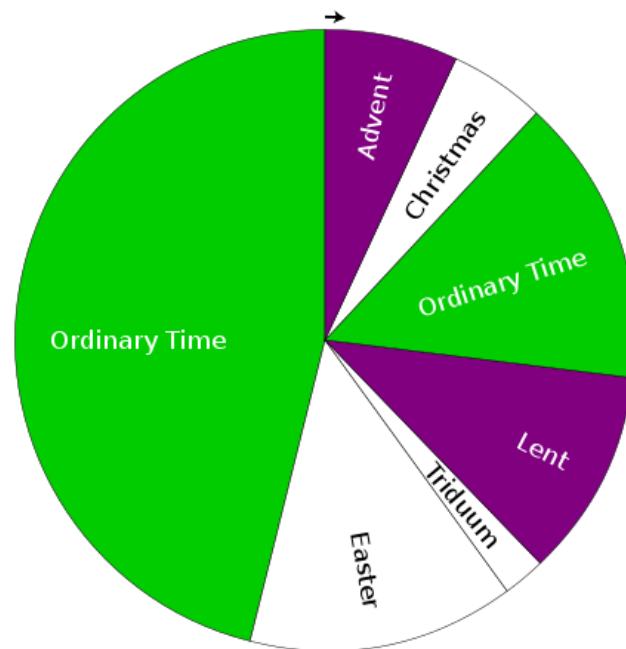
**Each session with children follows these moments with supporting materials:**

- 1. Opening Prayer**
- 2. Reading of Sacred Scripture**
- 3. Reflect with Children**
- 4. Faith in Practice**
- 5. Activities with children.**

**Thank you for joining this virtual community.**

## The Liturgical Calendar

The liturgical year consists of a seasonal cycle and a sanctoral cycle, called the Proper of Time and the Proper of Saints, respectively. Both are organized and published in a liturgical calendar. The Church's liturgical calendar is enriched by observances proper to local Churches, whether national, diocesan, parish-level, or religious community.



**The liturgical year has six seasons. The Church presents a cycle calendar of sacred time with the invitation to children and their families to live in the mystery of Jesus' life, death and resurrection at home, school and at play.**

- **Advent** – beginning of the Church's liturgical calendar with four weeks of preparation before the celebration of Jesus' birth;
- **Christmas** - recalling the Nativity of Jesus Christ and his manifestation to the peoples of the world;
- **Lent** - a six-week period of penance before Easter
- **Sacred Paschal Triduum** - the holiest "Three Days" of the Church's year, when the Christian people recall the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that is the Paschal Mystery.
- **Easter** - 50 days of joyful celebration of the Lord's resurrection from the dead and his sending forth of the Holy Spirit

- **Ordinary Time** - divided into two sections (one span of 4-8 weeks after Christmas Time and another lasting about six months after Easter Time), wherein the faithful consider the fullness of Jesus' teachings and works among his people.”<sup>1</sup>

## Unit 1 - Liturgical Catechesis for Advent and Christmas

### I. Session 1: Liturgical Catechesis for Advent (1)

#### 1. Opening Prayer

Prayer to the Holy Family<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,  
in you we contemplate  
the splendor of true love,  
to you we turn with trust.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
grant that our families too  
may be places of communion and prayer,  
authentic schools of the Gospel,  
and small domestic Churches.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
may families never again  
experience violence, rejection, and division:  
may all who have been hurt or scandalized  
find ready comfort and healing.

Holy Family of Nazareth,  
may the approaching Synod of Bishops  
make us once more mindful  
of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,  
and its beauty in God's plan.

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,  
graciously hear our prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> USCCB

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of Love*. n. 325.

## 2. Reading of Sacred Scripture

### Luke 2: 1-7

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

**Reflection:** We see in the Gospel the humility of the Lord. He makes himself very small so that we can get closer to him. That his love can encounter our love. The place of his birth was very humble because there was no room for Jesus, Mary, his mother, and Joseph, his foster father, in the inn.

In the season of Advent, the Church invites us to wait in joyful hope and to prepare our hearts to encounter Jesus in the Church's celebration of his birth. How can I prepare my heart and mind this Advent season to encounter Jesus? How can I share this Advent preparation with my family in prayer and in joyful waiting?

## 3. Reflect with Children

### The Joy of Advent

The Lord is coming! This short exclamation opens the time of Advent and is heard in a special way during these four weeks, and throughout the entire liturgical year. Advent is a time of preparation and hope. The Church invites us to stop, to be silent, watchful, and attentive to the loving signs of the Lord **in the words of Scripture and in our Advent prayers**. It is a time to make space in our hearts and in our homes for a small baby who is coming to bring us peace and joy. Advent invites us to become aware that **Jesus** wants to be close to each one of us.

The Latin word *Adventus* is a translation of the Greek word *parousia*, a word that is used to refer to the second coming of Christ. Some historians believe it came into existence very early in the Church, around the year 489.

As the *Catechism* teaches, “When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming”<sup>3</sup>

On the four Sundays of Advent the readings of Scripture and the prayers of the Church guide us to reflect on how God fulfilled his covenant with the people of Israel by preparing for and sending his divine son, Jesus, as one of us, that is the mystery of the incarnation.

As Pope Francis said, “We Christians are called to safeguard and spread the joy of waiting: we await God who loves us infinitely and at the same time we are awaited by Him. In this way, life becomes a great betrothal.”<sup>4</sup>

Across the countries of Latin America, there are many rich Catholic traditions for families and children. Some Advent traditions to share with children are:

- **Advent Wreath**
- ***Las Posadas***
- ***Las Novenas al Nino***
- **Christmas Tree**
- **Nativity Scene with an empty crib**
- **There are saints feast days during the Advent season and some of them have special traditions and celebrations around the world. For example:**
- **Feast of St. Nicholas on December 6th.**
- **The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary on December 8th.**
- **Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12th.**
- **Feast of Saint Lucy on December 13th.**
- **Christmas Eve or *Noche Buena* on December 24th.**

Ask children to share about their experiences of celebrating Advent traditions and feast days at home, in the parish, or at school. Explore the importance of these Advent traditions as a way to prepare our hearts and minds for the celebration of the birth of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 524

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis. Vatican City Message, December 2018

## Reflection questions

"Advent invites us to stop and be silent, to take in the presence of God." It is a time to pause in the constant rush of life and the bustle of preparations and parties before Christmas, it is also a time to be silent and contemplate the presence of God in my life. Can I have a moment of silence and contemplation during the day? How I am preparing my mind and my heart for the coming of the Lord at Christmas?

## 4. Faith in Practice at Home



## Advent Wreath

This long-standing Catholic tradition is full of meaning and symbolism. Its origin is not clearly understood, but it is believed that some Germanic people used wreaths to hold candles during the dark and cold months of winter. By the Middle Ages, Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. The Advent wreath with lit candles reminds us that Jesus Christ is “the light that came into the world” to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God into our homes and into our lives.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is rich in meaning. The wreath is made of various evergreens, pointing to the ever renewing cycles of life. The circle of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and everlasting life that Jesus brings. Pine cones, nuts, or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. Altogether, the wreath of evergreens is

a reminder of the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of the Father. At his birth, Jesus entered our world, true God becoming true man, to be victorious over sin and death through His passion, death, and resurrection.

The four candles on the Advent wreath represent the four weeks of Advent. Three candles are purple and one is rose in color. The purple candles symbolize the prayer, penance, sacrifices and good works done during Advent.

The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, also called Gaudete Sunday, when the priest wears rose vestments at Mass. Gaudete Sunday is the Sunday of Advent rejoicing because the Church has arrived at the midpoint of Advent and Christmas draws near. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes our prayerful expectation and joyful hope that surrounds our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.

The light of the candles reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world. In one tradition families replace the three purple and one rose candle with four white candles, that are lit throughout the Christmas season.

At home, families may put an Advent Wreath in a visible place, in the living room, or on the dinner table. The family chooses a good time to gather together and light the candle, perhaps after the family returns from Sunday Mass, or before or after a family meal. In some Latin American countries families sing Christmas carols after the small ceremony of the lighting of candles and the prayers. Families with small children can make their own Advent wreaths and share some special snack or treat after the lighting. This tradition focuses on Advent waiting and we make it enjoyable and memorable for the family.

## 5. Activities with the Children

Before Advent begins, make an Advent Wreath, this is an excellent family activity with the children.

During Advent gather the family around the dining room table and light the candle for the day. You can have a table ritual of reading the Gospel of the Day, praying a small prayer, singing a Christmas carol, and sharing some special treats as a family.



## Las Posadas

*Las Posadas* is a well-established Advent tradition in Mexico and many countries in Latin America. This tradition remembers Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem as they search for an inn before Jesus' birth. Posada means "inn" or "dwelling," and *Las Posadas* means "the inns."

This traditional celebration begins on December 16th and ends on December 24, and is celebrated during nine days as a "novena" before Christmas. The nine days also represent the nine months of Mary's pregnancy.

*Las posadas* can be organized in the parish or at different homes. Families and friends in the parish or neighborhood community can organize this tradition with visits to a different home for nine days.



## How to Celebrate Las Posadas

1. There is a procession that includes a colorful pageant of kids, representing the "pilgrims" mainly Mary and Joseph, also angels, shepherds, and the three wise kings can be part of the procession. In some Latin American countries, people carry images of Mary and Joseph in a procession and people walk behind it with candles.
2. Upon arrival at the house or the place in the parish, the "pilgrims" knock on the door and sing the traditional song "Pidiendo Posada." Then the hosts or "innkeepers" reply to the song from inside the house. At first they deny access to the visitors. Then the song continues and after singing several verses, the innkeepers recognize that the "pilgrims" are Mary and Joseph and they allow them to come in. All gathered sing the last verse of the song in a joyful tone, and they

continue singing, “please enter Holy Pilgrims, welcome to this inn, even though it is a poor place, I give it to you with all my heart.” All the people participating in the Posada enter the house and continue singing.

3. In some Latin American countries, the pilgrims of the Posadas go to different houses, while in other places they go to one house where a party follows. There they read Scripture and sing Christmas carols, sometimes with a Mariachi band.
4. Inside the house, the host offers food and drinks, such as hot chocolate, ponche, tamales, etc. The food varies according to local traditions and cultures.
5. In Mexico, an exciting element of Las Posadas is a star-shaped piñata filled with candy and toys. The piñatas are shaped in colorful seven-pointed stars, a reference to the star that guided the three kings to the newborn Jesus. Children take turns putting on a blindfold and hitting the piñata with a stick. Once it breaks and the contents spill, the children can take handfuls of treats. Modern piñatas come in many shapes, ranging from animals to cartoon characters.

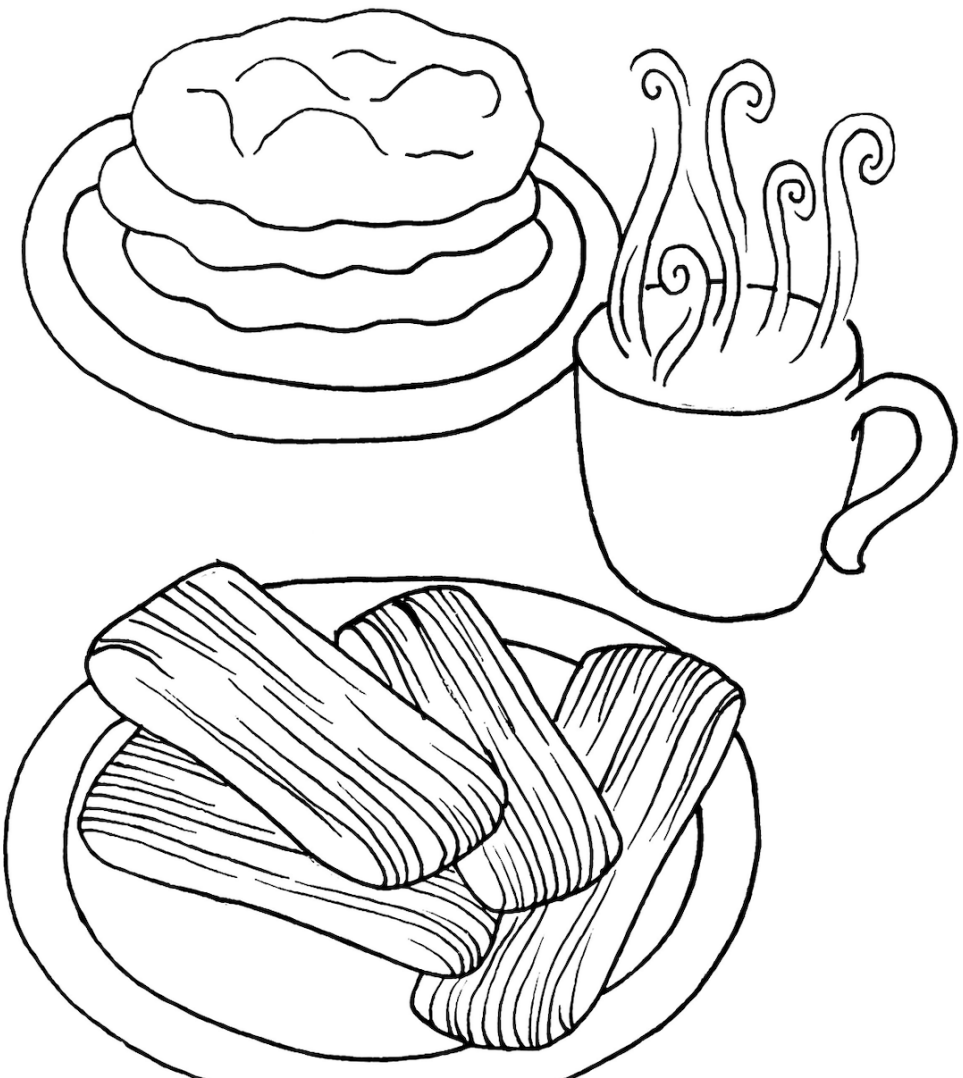


6. During the final Posada on Christmas Eve, families attend Mass followed by the "Noche Buena" or Christmas Eve dinner with traditional Christmas food.
7. In some parts of Mexico, in Latin American countries, and within Hispanic communities in the U.S. (especially Texas, New Mexico, California, and Arizona), the Las Posadas celebration includes the setting up of a Christmas tree with gifts and even a visit from Santa Claus!

## 5. Activities with the Children

Color these pages with the children and explain to them the tradition of Las Posadas.





## II. Session 2: Liturgical Catechesis for Advent (2)

### 1. Opening Prayer <sup>5</sup>

Most gracious God of infinite charity, that have loved all mankind, you gave us in your child the best pledge of your love, that once made Him a man in the womb of a Virgin and born in a manger for our health and cure; I, on behalf of all mortals, give you infinite thanks for so sovereign benefit.

In exchange for Him, I will offer the poverty, humility, and other virtues of your incarnated Son, I beseech you for His divine merits, for the discomforts of His birth and the tender tears He shed in the manger, and also prepare our hearts with deep humility, passion, and with such contempt of all earthly things, so that the newborn Jesus has in them his crib and dwell forever. Amen. (Glory Be, prayed three times)

### 2. Reading of Sacred Scripture

#### **Matthew 1: 18-23**

Now, this is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention when behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means “God is with us.”

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<sup>5</sup> Prayer from Novena de Aguinaldo. Colombian Folklore Prayer.





### 3. Reflect with Children

#### Las novenas al Niño o Novenas de Aguinaldo

*Las novenas de Aguinaldo*, also known as the Novena of Baby Jesus, is a nine day celebration before Christmas, from December 16 to December 24. This novena is very popular in Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. Recently, this Advent prayer has gained popularity in other Latin American countries and in parishes with Latin American communities around the United States. During each night of the novena, family and friends gather together to sing Christmas carols or *villancicos* with musical instruments. After the shared prayers, traditional Christmas food is served, buñuelos, natilla, empanadas, hot chocolate, sabajon, which is a special eggnog.

#### 5. Activities with the Children

Gather the children and family, begin with a silent pause, and recite the Novena Prayer. As the children attend to the petitions, they are reminded of what Christmas is all about and they are encouraged to prepare their hearts for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. After the prayers, the festive celebrations can begin, with the singing of carols and sharing of traditional meals.

As the children to name how they are preparing their heart for the celebration of the birth of Jesus. Invite the children to name their favorite part of the Novena Prayer. Remind them to unite their intentions and requests to be in union with Mary and Joseph who first prepared for the birth of Jesus.

## Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

### History of Our Lady of Guadalupe

On December 9, 1531, in Mexico, Our Lady appeared to Juan Diego, a poor humble Aztec Indian who had recently converted to the Catholic faith. She asked him to go to the Bishop Juan de Zumárraga, a Franciscan, and to tell him to build a church where she said “I will show and offer all of my love, my compassion, my help, and my protection to my people.” Juan Diego did as she asked. The Bishop asked for a sign that this message was really from Our Lady.

Mary granted his request. On December 12, she showed Juan where the most beautiful Castilian roses were located and told him to gather them. It was a miracle that the roses were there and in bloom because there was frost on the ground, and the ground was an infertile place where only cactus and thistles grew. After he gathered them, she helped arrange them in his tilma, or poncho, and told him to show them to the Bishop.



When he brought them to the Bishop, he was amazed at the roses but was even more amazed at what began to happen to Juan Diego’s tilma. Right before their very eyes, the image of Our Lady began to form on the cloth. The picture of Mary was beautiful beyond compare. The Bishop fell to his knees and had the church built at her request.

The tilma is still intact after 470 years. The colors have not faded and the cloth has not deteriorated. It has been on display in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe for pilgrims to view and venerate.

The manner in which Our Lady appeared on the tilma was very significant to the Aztec Indians. She was dressed in a way that they would understand who she was. Her royal clothes showed she was very important, perhaps a queen. She also had the symbol of the cross at her neck which was the same symbol the Spaniards had on their ships and in the churches they built. She had a sash tied around her waist which meant that she was with child, for this was the way the Aztec women dressed when they were pregnant. And on her beautiful dress were all sorts of designs and flowers. But there

was one flower on her dress that was very meaningful to the people. It had only four petals. To the Aztecs, the four petal flower was the symbol for the true God, the God above all gods. This flower was located on her abdomen, right over the place where Jesus was in the womb of Mary, his mother. The Aztecs immediately understood that she was the mother of the true God!



This appearance of Our Lady of Guadalupe was highly significant for the history of the American continent. For the Aztec Indians and the Spaniards were on the brink of war. The Aztec Indians' culture and religion were very different from the Spaniards. They worshipped many gods, to whom they would offer human sacrifices, often killing 50,000 people a year. The Spaniards, who were Catholic, were naturally offended by this. But they were also cruel to the Aztec, treating them unjustly. If a war had occurred, it would have been a violent one and countless Spaniards would have perished.

Mary's appearance changed everything, however. It helped the Indians to embrace Christianity and it helped the Spaniards to treat the Indians with respect and in keeping with their dignity as human beings. In the course of seven years, 6,000,000 Aztec Indians converted to the Catholic faith. This was the biggest conversion in the history of the Church!

This is why Our Lady of Guadalupe is the Patroness of the Americas. Saint Juan Diego, the humble man to whom she appeared, was canonized in the summer of 2002.

Mary's appearance also put an end to the worship of stone gods and the ritual of human sacrifice. Today the Church looks to Our Lady of Guadalupe in her defense of the sanctity of all human life, especially the child in the womb, and for the conversion of non-believers. We pray for the intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe under the title, Patroness of the Unborn.<sup>6</sup>

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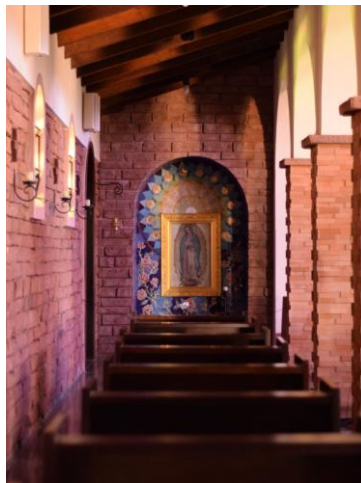
<sup>6</sup> Excerpt from a document of the Office of Communication of the Archdiocese of Baltimore Office.



## Celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe

Our Lady of Guadalupe is the patroness of the Americas and is one of the most beloved Marian devotions, not only in Mexico but in Latin America, Spain, and the Philippines. Her feast day is celebrated on December 12 with devotions, music, and colorful traditions that vary across the countries of Latin America.

In Mexico, many faithful offer pilgrimages and sacrifices, such as walking on their knees to “La Morenita” as a gesture of love and gratitude. One popular devotion is to bring flowers to Mary, with special roses and to sing her praises in “Las Mananitas,” a traditional birthday song that is well-known in Latin America, and often sung with mariachis. This tradition is also celebrated with processions in parishes around the United States and Latin America. In some countries it is a tradition that the children wear traditional Indian costumes to remember the humble Saint Juan Diego.





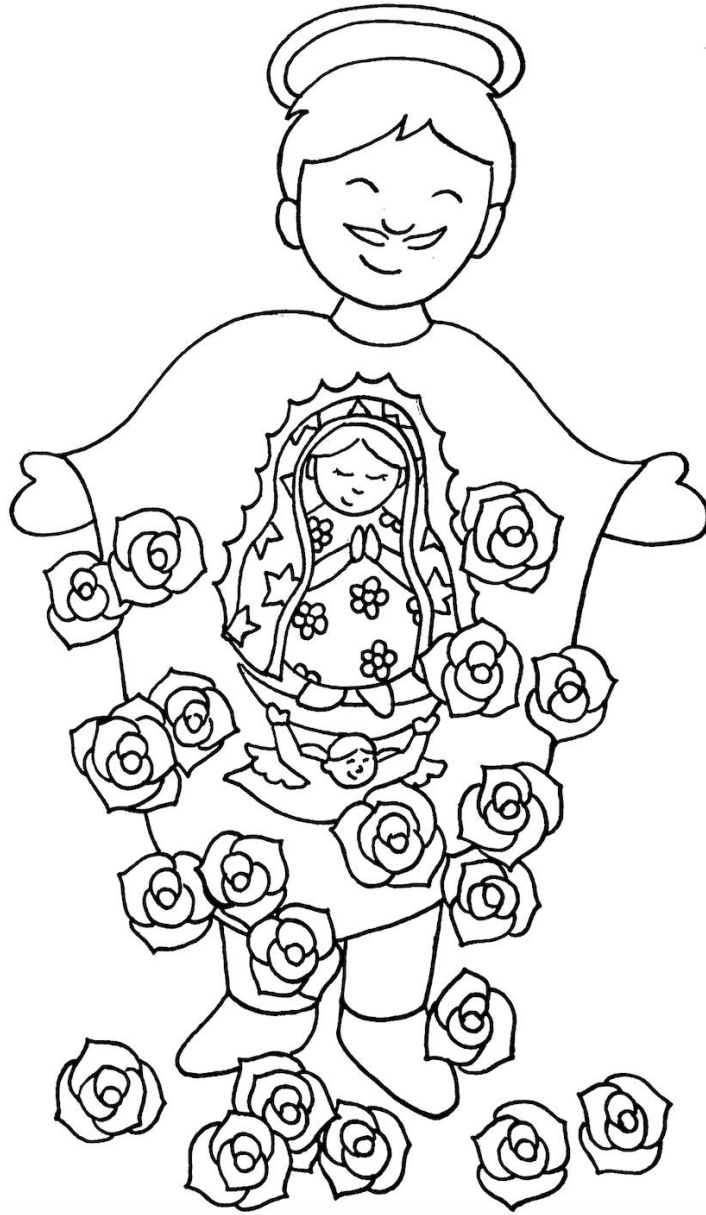
#### 4. Faith in Practice at Home

This Marian feast is an opportunity to strengthen a child's devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to join in the Church's celebration of her love, protection, and tenderness for the faithful. Here are some ways to connect the Church's liturgical celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the practice of Marian devotions in the parish, school or at home.

- Read the story of the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe to the children inviting them to see themselves as part of the story at key points in the account;
- Invite the children and their families to participate in the parish Mass and celebrations for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe;
- Bring the children to Church and locate an image of Mary, perhaps a stained glass window, sculpture or painting. Pray a Hail Mary or decade of the Rosary in front of the Marian image. Invite the children to sing a Marian hymn and offer flowers to Mary in honor of this feast day;
- Pray the Rosary as a family or with the faith community in parish or school;
- Enjoy a Mexican treat or dinner to celebrate this Marian feast.

## 5. Activities with the Children

Color these pages with the children and explain to them the history of the Apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe.





### III. Session 3: Liturgical Catechesis for Christmas (1)

#### Christmas



Gerard van Honthorst - Adoration of the Shepherds - 1622

#### 1. Opening Prayer

##### Christmas Prayer<sup>7</sup>

O sweet Child of Bethlehem, grant that we may share with all our hearts in this profound mystery of Christmas. Put into the hearts of men and women this peace for which they sometimes seek so desperately and which you alone can give to them. Help them to know one another better, and to live as brothers and sisters, children of the same Father. Reveal to them also your beauty, holiness, and purity. Awaken in their hearts love and gratitude for your infinite goodness. Join them all together in your love. And give us your heavenly peace. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Saint John XXIII



## 2. Reading of Sacred Scripture

John 1: 1-15

In the beginning, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him, nothing came to be. What came to be through him was life, and this life was the light of the human race; the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

A man named John was sent from God. He came for testimony, to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came to be through him, but the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him, he gave the power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God.

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth.

## 3. Reflect with Children

“Once more, the Lord grants us the grace of celebrating the mystery of his birth. Each year, kneeling before the Child lying in the manger (cf. Lk 2:12), we can look at our lives in this special light. It is not the light of the glory of this world, but “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9). The humility of the Son of God who partook of our human condition is, for us, a lesson in seeing things as they really are. Just as he chose poverty, which is not merely the absence of wealth, but utter simplicity, so too, each of us is called to return to what is essential in our own lives, to discard all that is superfluous and a potential hindrance on the path of holiness. And that path of holiness is non-negotiable.”<sup>8</sup>

With these words, Pope Francis invites children and their families to encounter Jesus in the manger, and to let him transform our lives with his love and graces.

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis. Address of His Holiness to the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings. December 22, 2022

Christmas is the liturgical feast that commemorates the birth of Christ, when Christians celebrate that Jesus Christ, the Son of God "came down from heaven for us men and for our salvation, and by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate from Mary the Virgin and was made man," as we pray in the words of the Creed. This season is prepared by the four weeks of Advent. When we live the Advent season well, the Christmas season is lived in its deepest and fullest meaning.

The mystery of Jesus' birth unfolds over the entire season of Christmas. Invite the children to see that Christmas does not end on Christmas day but continues through the liturgical season as the fountain of great celebrations and joy, especially for children. It is a graced opportunity to live the traditions and richness of the Catholic faith as expressed in various Latin American cultures. For children it is easy for Christmas to center around gifts, treats and celebrations. Parents, catechists and teachers have the opportunity to invite children to reflect on the true meaning of Christmas and put a child's encounter with the newborn Jesus at the center of celebrations at home, parish and school. For Jesus is the reason for the season.

During this Christmas Season, the church invites us to prepare our hearts and homes for the coming of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the celebration of his Nativity. We are invited to be united to our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and seek her help. Do I take care of my spiritual life during this Christmas Season? Do I set aside time for personal prayer, spiritual reading, and reflection? How I am living concrete acts of charity among the members of my family and friends?

## The Christmas Mystery<sup>9</sup>

The *Catechism* teaches us that: “Jesus was born in a humble stable, into a poor family. Simple shepherds were the first witnesses to this event. In this poverty heaven's glory was made manifest. The Church never tires of singing the glory of this night:

The Virgin today brings into the world the Eternal and the earth offers a cave to the Inaccessible. The angels and shepherds praise him and the magi advance with the star, For you are born for us, Little Child, God eternal!

To become a child in relation to God is the condition for entering the kingdom. For this, we must humble ourselves and become little. Even more: to become "children of God" we must be "born from above" or "born of God". Only when Christ is formed in us will the mystery of Christmas be fulfilled in us. Christmas is the mystery of this "marvelous exchange.”



### 4. Faith in Practice at Home

#### The Nativity Scene

The setting up of a Nativity or crèche set in the home brings the mystery of the birth of Jesus into the heart of the home. It also connects the home to the Church's celebration of Jesus' birth in the Christmas liturgy.

The Gospels tell us that Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth and went to Bethlehem, the city of Joseph, to enroll in the census called for by an edict of the Roman emperor,

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<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 525 and 526



Caesar Augustus. Both Saint Matthew and Saint Luke tell us the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and Luke goes on to say that Mary laid her newborn son in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn: Jesus was born in the place where cattle were kept. Lead the children to reflect on the meaning of the humble place of Jesus' birth.

Invite the children and parents to set up a Nativity set at home. Bless the Nativity scene with the prayer given below. A stable with a manger, animals, shepherds, the three wise kings, and the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph make up a typical nativity scene. Some Nativity sets are large with representations of small towns, villages, or even particular sporting teams. In some Latin American countries, people participate in competitions and festivals focused on Nativity scenes or "nacimientos."

### History of the Nativity Scene

The Nativity scene that we can find now in churches, town squares, and homes around the world was originally conceived by St. Francis of Assisi in the year 1223. According to his biography, he asked to be able to do something to foster devotion to the birth of Jesus. As a part of this own devotion to the birth of Jesus, Saint Francis prepared the scene with real people and real animals, including an ox, a donkey, and even a manger with hay in the Italian town of Greccio. This was a good teaching moment and this devotion spread quickly. Now it is part of the Christmas tradition in homes, churches and public spaces around the world.

### 5. Activities with the Children

- Involve children in setting up Christmas decorations and the Nativity or crèche scene in a prominent and visible part of the house;
- Sing Christmas carols with the children around the manger on the Sundays of Advent or as the family schedule allows;
- Encourage the family to contemplate quietly the Nativity scene while reading the story of Jesus' birth before it;
- Explain the history of special Christmas foods and treats enjoyed in your family;
- Take time to visit those who are alone or sick and remind children to share gifts with the poor, especially with poor children.

- Take time during the Advent and Christmas seasons to receive the Sacrament of Confession and Reconciliation. The family is spiritually prepared to receive Jesus in the Eucharist at Christmas. Gently invite family and friends who do not practice the faith to join your family in prayer.
- Invite children to participate with their families in Christmas Mass.
- Invite children to reflect on the reason for exchanging gifts as their attention is drawn to Jesus, the Son of God who is the greatest gift sent by God into the world.



## IV. Session 4: Liturgical Catechesis for Christmas (2)

### Christmas Season and the Epiphany

#### 1. Opening Prayer

Lord God of heaven and earth,  
you revealed your only-begotten Son to every nation  
by the guidance of a star.  
Bless this house and all who inhabit it.  
Fill them (us) with the light of Christ,  
that their (our) concern for others may reflect your love.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
R/. Amen.

May Christ Jesus dwell with us, keep us from all harm,  
and make us one in mind and heart, now and forever.  
R/. Amen.

#### 2. Reading of Sacred Scripture

##### **Matthew 2:1-12**

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star’s appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage.”

After their audience with the king, they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child

was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.



### 3. REFLECT WITH CHILDREN

#### Christmas Season (2)

This Gospel speaks about an encounter that happened at the birth of Jesus for “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” (Mt 2:10) It is the joy of one whose heart has received a ray of God’s light and who can now see that his hope has been realized—the joy of one who has found what he sought, and has himself been found,”<sup>10</sup> as Pope Benedict XVI notes. God has revealed himself to humanity, not only to the people of Israel but to all. The wise men represent all people who come from distant lands in search of a light to guide and give meaning to their lives.

Christmas is one of the central feasts of the Church’s liturgical year, second only to Easter itself. Celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ directs our hearts and minds to the mystery of the incarnation, the feast of God becoming flesh (the Latin “*in carne*” means “enfleshment”). This is the heart of the Christian faith.

Christmas is not one day, it is a season. The liturgical season of Christmas begins with the vigil Masses on Christmas Eve and concludes on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. After Christmas, the Church’s liturgical calendar opens to eight days of

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<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (p. 106). Crown Publishing Group.

celebrations of the mystery of Jesus' birth. The Church calls these days the Octave of Christmas as an eight day celebration when each day's liturgy is special like a Sunday Mass with two readings and the recitation of the Creed.

The Octave begins on Christmas Day and ends on January 1st the feast of Mary the mother of God. During the solemn week of the Christmas Octave the church commemorates:

- St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr on December 26
- St John the Evangelist, apostle, writer of the fourth Gospel and the Book of Revelation on December 27
- The Feast of the Holy Innocents on December 28
- The Holy Family, the first Sunday after Christmas
- Mary Mother of God on January 1st.

#### 4. Faith in Practice at Home

#### The Epiphany of Fiesta de los Reyes Magos



The origin of this feast is found in the Gospels. On Epiphany, the Church celebrates the revelation of God to all peoples in the birth of Jesus. Each gift offered to Jesus has a symbolic meaning. As Pope Benedict XVI notes, “In the Church’s tradition—with certain variations—the three gifts have been thought to represent three aspects of the mystery of Christ: the gold points to Jesus’ kingship, the incense to his divine sonship, the myrrh to the mystery of his Passion.”<sup>11</sup>

This feast is celebrated with various cultural traditions in many Latin American countries and Spain. In some cultures, Epiphany is the time to receive gifts from the the three kings, or “Los Tres Reyes,” who begin the tradition of gift giving. In some countries, celebrations include parades and festivals in the community.



## 5. Activities with the Children

- Gather family and friends to celebrate the “Three Kings” and share “la Rosca de Reyes,” a traditional bread made in Latin American families for this occasion. You can also share traditional Latin American food like tamales, refried beans, hot chocolate, ponche, etc. One custom related to “la Rosca de Reyes,” is that the one who finds the baby Jesus (baked into the bread) is expected to host a celebration for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord or “Fiesta de Candelaria” on February 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- Preserve the tradition of giving small gifts to children on this day. Parents ask their children to leave one shoe under the Christmas Tree the night before so that children can find their gifts on the feast day.

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (p. 107). Crown Publishing Group.

- Before sharing the family meal read the passage from the Gospel of St. Matthew 2: 1-2 aloud. Then reflect on the meaning of Epiphany for each member of the family. Lead the children in singing Christmas carols reflecting the journey of the three kings, such as We Three Kings of Orient Are.
- Some parishes with Latin American communities celebrate this feast with mariachis. In other communities, three adults dress up as the three kings and bring gifts to the children.
- **Color these pages and explain the Three Kings Story to the children.**







