

~ The Epistle ~

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THE MOST REVEREND SHANE B. JANZEN, ARCHBISHOP AND RECTOR

*Come thou long expected Jesus!
Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.*

ADVENT is upon us again with the suddenness of the Season it heralds. The Church year has wound down and now begins anew. For most of us, the turning of the Season from green to purple vestments, from autumn leaves to winter chill (including snow), with the lighting of the Advent candles upon a wreath of green, these call us to the approach of Christmas, and to the glorious celebration of the first coming of Christ in the Babe of Bethlehem. Advent is indeed a season of preparation, a time to prepare our hearts and our homes for the coming of the Redeemer King.

In the midst of what can become a hectic time of year for many, comes the challenge of Advent: "Behold thy King cometh unto thee...Prepare ye the way...Make ready a highway for our God." Advent reminds us of the significance of the first Coming (advent) of Jesus, and calls us to look forward to the final Coming of Christ in glory at the end of time. Advent tells us that God has come, is present with us now, and that He will come again in glory.

Though twenty centuries have passed since the Advent of our God that first Christmas in Bethlehem, the Church still waits and watches as a faithful Bride for the coming of the Bridegroom. When our Lord came among us in the Word-made-flesh, there were many who doubted whether He was really the One whom they had expected. Was this Jesus of Nazareth in very truth God's final and fullest revelation of Himself to man? Even John the Baptist, while in prison, sent word asking, "Art thou He that cometh, or look we for another?" His own people doubted that God had come among them. So it is in our world today -- an anxious people await the Good News of

their salvation but have difficulty believing that in Jesus is the Source of salvation and the true reflection of God's love for His people. Men and women still challenge His presence and seeming failure to bring about the world they would want or imagine God would will. Yet the incredible mystery of the Incarnation is the most powerful and convincing evidence of God's concern and love -- and of His ultimate will and desire for mankind.

We enter into the Season of Advent with an eye to the future: A future which is both temporal and eschatological. In advent we prepare our hearts and homes for the coming Christmas Season; in our souls we prepare for the coming Day of Judgement, when all shall be revealed, and each person will receive from the Lord the reward for his or her labours. The two-fold nature of Advent mirrors the two-fold nature of our lives -- for we live in time but are fashioned for eternity.

Advent is for Christians a time of prayer, a time for eagerly awaiting the greatest gift of all, the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, in time and eternity. Christmas is also a time of prayer and giving, when we celebrate the greatest gift God could give to His people -- the gift of His only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world! As Christians, we are not ashamed to profess our faith in Him; nor to proclaim to all the world: *Jesus Is The Reason For The Season!*

Finally, please allow me to wish each of you a holy Season of Advent, a very Merry Christmas, and a Blessed New Year. I am most honoured to call you brothers and sisters in Christ, and to share with you in our common journey of faith. You continue to be for me a tremendous source of strength and inspiration. For this, and so much more, I thank you and pray God's blessing upon you.

Archbishop Shane B. Janzen

Advent: A Season of Hope and Anticipation

ADVENT is the season of waiting. The Chosen people of Israel waited, hoping for the great day of their liberation. Though at times there seemed to be no future, the prophets bid them be patient, for God would be faithful to His promises. Announced by the prophets of old, especially by the prophet Isaiah, the shepherd-king, Jesus Christ the Messiah, was ushered into a distracted world by John the Baptist: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord; make His paths straight!" (Mt. 3:3) John the Baptist fearlessly called the world to repent, to put away sin and to live in the fullness of God. He proclaimed Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ -- the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world -- the long-awaited Saviour!

Our Lord Jesus Christ came long ago *in history*, Son of God and Son of Mary. He comes to us today *in faith and in mystery*, in the word of holy Scripture, and in the grace-filled presence of the holy Sacraments. He will return again in glory at the end of time, in the first day of the new and eternal week, the day which will have no ending. As Christians, we live in the present, but we look forward in joyful hope to the great return of our Lord Jesus Christ. We live as servants and subjects of the Lord Jesus, ready to meet the Master when He comes. We watch and pray, not attached to possessions or the things of this world, but ready and eager to praise His holy Name and to witness to His holy calling in word and deed, by sacrifice and self-giving. Advent is such a time of waiting, watching, and preparing -- a time for us to search our souls, to straighten out the Lord's avenue into our lives, and to prepare our hearts and our homes for His coming again.

Advent is a time of prayer, for eagerly awaiting the greatest gift of all, Jesus the Lord. He is the light who shines in the darkness of our world. Advent wreaths are lighted. We join the angels and the saints in proclaiming the great wonders God has worked among us. We hear anew the prophecies of old; and we are renewed in our joy and hope at the promise of our Lord's return, when He shall wipe every tear from our eyes, and make all things new.

The liturgical season of Advent is divided into four Sundays. The First Sunday in Advent announces Advent's principal theme -- the coming of the Lord again in glory. We await the coming of the Lord who is our salvation. Penitence and prayer are the elements of our preparation. The Second Sunday in Advent (also known as 'Scripture Sunday') emphasizes both the hope of our salvation and the revelation of God in Holy Scripture. The Third Sunday in Advent ('Gaudete' or 'Rose' Sunday) calls to mind the proclamation of John the Baptist to repent of our sins and to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives. In the face of His coming in judgement, both final and ever-present, 'the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God' prepare His way by preparing His people. With the Third Sunday, we conclude our preparation for Christ's coming *in judgement* and turn once again to the joyful remembrance of our Lord's first coming *in humility* -- as the holy Child of Bethlehem. The preparation for Christ's coming in humility is also the preparation for His coming in judgement. On the Fourth Sunday in Advent all the themes of Advent converge and climax: 'Raise up, we beseech Thee, O Lord, Thy power and come among us'. All is in readiness. We wait in silence and in joyous anticipation for the coming of our Saviour Jesus Christ, Who is our Lord and our Redeemer.





THE CHRISTMAS NOVENA (December 16th to 24th)

A Novena is a nine-day period of prayer in preparation for some particular feast in the Christian Calendar or to pray for some particular intention. The first novena was kept, at the express command of the Risen Christ, by the Apostles, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the disciples in the Upper Room from the day of Our Lord's Ascension to the day of Pentecost (*Acts 1:12-14*). The earliest ecclesiastical novena recorded is one in preparation for Christmas. The Christmas Novena begins on December 16, as noted in the Book of Common Prayer, p. xiii.

The Prayers: (*to be said daily*)

OLORD Jesus Christ, Who for our sake didst vouchsafe to descend from Thy throne of glory in heaven to this vale of tears; Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary and wast made man: Make, we beseech thee, our hearts a fit habitation for Thyself. Beautify and fill them with all spiritual graces, and possess them wholly by Thy power. Give us grace to prepare for Thy Coming with deep humility, to receive Thee with burning love, and to hold Thee with a firm faith; that we may never leave Thee nor forsake Thee; Who livest and reignest, for ever and ever. Amen.

Here say one of the following 'O' Antiphons, according to the day:

Dec. 16: O WISDOM, which camest out of the mouth of the Most High, and reachest from one end to another, mightily and sweetly ordering all things: Come and teach us the way of prudence.

Dec. 17: O ADONAI (Lord) and Leader of the house of Israel, who appearedst in the bush to Moses in a flame of fire, and gavest him the Law in Sinai: Come and redeem us with an outstretched arm.

Dec. 18: O ROOT OF JESSE, which standest for an ensign of the people, at whom Kings shall shut their mouths: Come and deliver us and tarry not.

Dec. 19: O KEY OF DAVID, and the Sceptre of the house of Israel, that openest and no man shutteth, and shutteth and no man openeth: Come and bring the prisoner out of the prison-house, and him that sitteth in darkness and the shadow of death.

Dec. 20: O DAYSPRING, Brightness of the Light Everlasting, and Sun of Righteousness: Come and enlighten him that sitteth in darkness and the shadow of death.

Dec. 21: O THOMAS DIDYMUS, to thee it was vouchsafed to touch Christ risen: Whom we petition, by His mercy from on high, to aid us in our miseries, lest we be doomed with the lost when the Judge appeareth.

Dec. 22: O KING OF THE NATIONS, and their Desire, the Cornerstone, who makest both one: Come and save mankind, whom Thou formedst of clay.

Dec. 23: O EMMANUEL, our King and Lawgiver, the Desire of all nations, and their Salvation: Come and save us, O Lord our God.

Dec. 24: O VIRGIN OF VIRGINS, how shall this be? For neither before thee was any like thee, nor shall there be after. Daughters of Jerusalem, why marvel ye at me? The thing which ye behold is a divine mystery.

Finally, conclude with the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Advent Collect:

OUR FATHER, Who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our trespasses, As we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil. Amen.

HAIL Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women; And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

ALmighty GOD, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which Thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the Last Day, when He shall come again in His glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through the same Jesus Christ thy Son our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee, in the unity of the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end. Amen.



SYMBOLS AND SIGHTS OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas is filled with sights and sounds and symbols, many of which have lost their Christian symbolism in a secular world. Here are the Christian meaning of Christmas symbols:

CHRIST CHILD: We celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas, which means Christ's Mass (the Mass of Christ). Christ means "the anointed one." Jesus was God made flesh, come to earth so that we could understand how much God loves us and so that we would not be afraid to approach Him. Who could be afraid of an infant? The Infant Christ is a living symbol of the humility of God Who left the glory of heaven to come to earth in poverty and obscurity, showing us that we, too, are to be little and simple and to give our lives for others. Lord, the symbolism of Christmas is replete with many secular symbols, all of which point to You. You are the Beginning and the End, the Word made flesh, God in a manger. Help me, Lord, to imitate Your lowliness so that I can serve You well. Amen.

HOLLY: Holly is an extremely hardy shrub that can be grown most places, making it one of the few plants that can withstand temperatures from 110 degrees F to - 40 degrees F. The four hundred species of holly, ranging from dwarf holly plants six inches high to huge holly trees seventy feet tall, are native to all the continents except Antarctica and Australia. Holly plants are noted for their attractive red berries and glossy, sharp-toothed green leaves which remain on the plant year round. The holly bush represents immortality, a trait that God has given to each human being. We are all destined to live forever, either with the Lord or separated from Him. The sharp-toothed edge of the holly leaf reminds Christians of the crown of thorns with which the soldiers mocked Our Lord during His Passion. They laughingly hailed Him as king, never realizing that He is, indeed, King of the universe. As a Christmas symbol, the red holly berry represents Christ's blood, shed for all people including those who reject Him. Lord, You have destined me to live forever in eternity with You. But what a price You paid for my salvation, even to being mocked, beaten, and crucified. Your Blood was the price of my eternal life. Lord, may I be forever grateful. Amen.

GIFTS: For many people, gifts define Christmas. They focus on the giving and receiving of gifts instead of on our greatest Gift Jesus Who gave Himself to us at Christmas. The wise men who brought their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to honor the infant King in Bethlehem's manger have inspired the concept of gift giving at Christmas. God also gives us the gifts of the Holy Spirit which help us to follow God's direction in our lives. The seven Gifts of the

Holy Spirit are Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Piety, Fortitude, and Fear of the Lord (Awe of God's Greatness and Power). Lord, this Christmas I ask that you revive in me the Gifts of Your Holy Spirit. Give me great Wisdom, correct Understanding, sure Counsel, fuller Knowledge, fervent Piety, unshakeable Fortitude, and humble me before Your Greatness and Majesty so that Fear (Awe) of You forms the fabric of my life. I ask these gifts in the Name of Your Gift to us, Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

FRUIT: People give fruit baskets as gifts. Cranberry sauce is part of many Christmas meals. At the turn of the last century, good children would receive their only orange of the year as a Christmas gift. As a Christmas symbol, fruit recalls the twelve Fruits of the Holy Spirit. These Fruits result from the activity of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The twelve Fruits of the Holy Spirit are: Charity (Love), Joy, Peace, Patience, Benignity (Kindness), Goodness, Long-Suffering (Patiently Bearing Suffering over a Long Period of Time), Mildness, Faith, Modesty, Contineny (Purity), Chastity. Lord, grow in me the Fruits of the Holy Spirit so that I may attain to the holiness to which You have called me. Amen.

MISTLETOE: Mistletoe is an aerial parasite that has no roots of its own. It lives off the tree to which it attaches itself and, without that tree, it would die. Mistletoe is a Christmas symbol of our love which derives from and exists only because God loves us. God, Who is Love, created us in love and caused us to be able to love. Christians are humbled before these words of St. John the Evangelist: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him" (1 Jn. 4:16). Just as mistletoe may not acknowledge the tree which sustains it, so people may not acknowledge that the love of God sustains them. But if mistletoe were taken from the tree and any person removed from God's love, both would die. Lord, You are my God and my Divine Lover. Increase in me my love for You and for my neighbor. Perfect my love and help me to love unselfishly as You love me. Amen.

EVERGREENS: In cool climates, many plants are deciduous. That is, they lose their leaves in the fall, remain dead-looking all winter, and begin to sprout new growth in the spring. Evergreens are, broadly speaking, any type of plant that retains its green leaves or needles all year round. As Christian Christmas symbols, evergreens symbolize perseverance and resiliency to adversity. They remind us of Jesus' words, "The ones who persevere to the end shall be saved." Our faith must remain vibrant in all spiritual, economic, political, and social environments. Lord, give me an evergreen faith! May I love and trust You no matter what

harshness is battering me. I will follow You in the pleasant, balmy times of my life and in the bitter ice storms as well. Keep my faith alive!

CHRISTMAS TREE: Many pagan cultures worshipped evergreens, saw them as symbols of immortality, and used them to ward off evil spirits. In the early 700's, Saint Boniface, who converted the German people to Christianity, demolished the Oak of Thor, the mighty sacred tree worshipped by the Saxons. From its roots grew a fir tree which Boniface took as a sign of the Christian faith. In the 11th century, Paradise plays portrayed the tree of Paradise, decorated with red apples. During the 15th century, the faithful began to erect trees in their homes on December 24, the feast day of Adam and Eve. About the year 1500, inspired by a snow covered fir tree, a small tree was brought indoors and decorated with candles in honor of Christ's birth. By the 18th century, the custom of decorating a Christmas tree was well established in France, Germany, and Austria. Thus, the Christmas tree represents the original Tree of Paradise, the burning bush which spoke to Moses, the branch of Jesse from which Jesus was born, the life-giving tree of the cross of Christ, and the tree which St. John the Apostle saw in the Book of Revelations whose leaves have medicine for the people and which yields fruit each month for the healing of the nations. Because it is green year-round, the evergreen tree represents hope. Its needles and its narrow crest point upward, turning our thoughts to heaven. Because the tree is cut down and then erected again, it is a symbol of Christ's resurrection. Lord, may I see Christmas trees as a sign of hope and as reminders of the many trees that figure in salvation history. I thank You, Lord, for turning the tree of Adam and Eve's sin into the tree of life through the cross of Christ. Because of the tree on which Christ died, You have given us the promise of eternal life. We praise you forever. Amen.

TINSEL: Tinsel are the thin, metallic strands that are used in Christmas decorations. A legend tells of a poor, faithful family who wished to decorate a Christmas tree in honor of the Christ Child but who had no money for decorations. In the night, spiders came and spun webs across the tree. Then the Christ Child, honoring the family's faith, turned the threads into silver. When we want to give our all to Christ, but we think that we have nothing of value to give, God gives value to our offerings. God does not measure worth by worldly standards but by spiritual ones. Give Christ your all and He will consider it more precious than gold. Lord, I am nobody in the world's eyes. But I give myself to You to do whatever You wish with me. Accept my humble gift for I give it in love. Amen.

CANDLES AND CHRISTMAS LIGHTS: In the Advent wreath, a purple (for penance) candle is

lit for the first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent and a pink (for joy) one for the third Sunday of Advent. On Christmas Day, a white (for the purity of Christ) candle is lit. Before electricity, people used candles to light their homes and to decorate their Christmas trees. Today electric lights have replaced candles. Candles and Christmas lights represent Christ, the Light of the World. "I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall ever walk in darkness; no, he shall possess the light of life" (*John 8:12*). "The light shines on in the darkness, a darkness that did not overcome it" (*John 1: 5*). Candles and Christmas lights also remind us that we are to be light to others, to show them the way to Christ. Lord, be my Light in the darkness and help me to be a light to others, to show them the way to you. When all seems hopeless, help me to remember that the darkness cannot overcome Your Light. You are the eternal Brilliance of God. May Your Light be my hope, my God. Amen.

BELLS: Bells were part of the Jewish high priest's garb. God gave these instructions to Moses: The robe of the ephod you shall make entirely of violet material. It shall have an opening for the head in the center, and around this opening there shall be a selvage, woven as at the opening of a shirt, to keep it from being torn. All around the hem at the bottom you shall make pomegranates, woven of violet, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen twined, with gold bells between them; first a gold bell, then a pomegranate, and thus alternating all around the hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it when ministering, that its tinkling may be heard as he enters and leaves the LORD'S presence in the sanctuary; else he will die. (*Exodus 28:31-35*). Christmas bells not only symbolize the joy of Christmas; they also remind us that Christ is the High Priest. Those priests were many because they were prevented by death from remaining in office, but he [Jesus], because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them. It was fitting that we should have such a high priest: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, higher than the heavens. He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did that once for all when he offered himself. (*Hebrews 7: 23-27*). Lord, we praise and thank You for the gift of Your Son, our great High Priest, Who offered Himself as the sacrifice for our sins. Only Your great mercy and justice could conceive of such a gift to us. Let our lives joyfully proclaim that Jesus is Priest, Prophet, and King! Amen!

CANDY CANE: The candy cane is shaped like a shepherd's crook, reminding us that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, came into our world at

Christmas. The red stripe symbolizes Christ's sacrifice and the white background His purity. The candy cane reminds us of Isaiah's prophecy of the suffering servant who was led like a lamb to the slaughter (*Isaiah 53:7*) and by his stripes you were healed (*Isaiah 53:5*). Candy canes have a peppermint flavor, reminiscent of hyssop which had medicinal purposes. The Psalmist prayed, Lord, cleanse me with hyssop that I may be clean (*Psalm 51:9*). Jesus came to heal our ills and to purge us of sin. The peppermint flavor reminds us that our healing came at the price of Christ's life. When Jesus was crucified, a bystander stuck a wine-filled sponge on a branch of hyssop to give Jesus a drink. After tasting the wine, Jesus said, "Now it is finished," and died (*cf. John 19:29-30*). The candy cane is meant to be broken and shared, just as Jesus' Body is broken and shared at every Eucharist. Lord, you came to shepherd us rightly, to live for us purely, and to die for us lovingly. Cleanse me with hyssop that I may be clean. Wash me and I shall be whiter than snow. . . . A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me. . . My sacrifice, O God, is a contrite spirit; a heart contrite and humbled, O God, You will not spurn (*Psalm 51*).

GINGERBREAD MAN: The gingerbread man does not create himself but rather is created. Gingerbread people remind us of God's creation of Adam in the Garden of Eden, and God's creation of each of us. Spices, reminiscent of those mentioned in the Old Testament, make the gingerbread man the color of earth (Adam was created from the dust of the earth). Like us, gingerbread people are not immortal. They are destined to be eaten and thus to unite with their creators. God does not eat us (rather we consume His Body and Blood in the Eucharist), but our mortal bodies, like that of the gingerbread man's, will not live forever. God created us for eternal union with Him after we die. Gingerbread people remind us to look beyond ourselves to our Creator with whom we will one day be united. Lord, often I hurry through life with little thought of You. Yet I exist because You created me. And I will exist forever either with You or away from You. You have made me for union with Yourself. Bring my life into union with that goal. Amen.

SANTA CLAUS: Santa Claus is an alteration of Saint Nicholas, fourth Bishop of Myra (located in modern Turkey) whose feast day is December 6. He is also called Saint Nicholas of Bari after his relics were taken to Bari, Italy, in 1087. Saint Nicholas was known for taking to heart Jesus' words about almsgiving. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right is doing, so that your almsgiving maybe secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you. (*Matthew 6: 3-4*) Saint Nicholas was very generous to the poor, but most often anonymously. The most famous story concerns

three young women whose destitute father was going to force them into prostitution in order to survive. To prevent this heinous crime, Nicholas, on three different nights, anonymously went to their father's house and threw a bag of gold through an open window. The bishop's miter and fur trimmed red winter garments were corrupted into Santa's outfit, while Saint Nicholas's generosity was transferred to the "jolly old man" who delivers gifts anonymously on Christmas Eve. Lord, grant me the spirit of generosity that Saint Nicholas possessed. Help me to do good in secret, without any desire for recognition and repayment. May I trust in You for any reward.

SUGAR AND CHRISTMAS CANDY: Everyone loves Christmas treats, most often sweetened with sugar. Sugar isn't found in Scripture and, for centuries, only the wealthy used it. The lower classes used honey or molasses as sweeteners. References to honey are found frequently in Scripture. God promised Abraham that he would bring his people to a "land of milk and honey," that is a rich and fertile homeland. The manna in the desert tasted "like wafers made with honey," a foretaste of the Eucharist which, although not sweetened with honey, is sweet to us spiritually because it is the Body of Christ. Isaiah prophesied concerning the Messiah, "the virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall be living on curds and honey by the time he learns to reject the bad and choose the good." Since curds and honey were abundant in a prosperous, peaceful land, they indicate that the virgin's son will bring peace. Curds and honey also refer to the "land of milk and honey" promised to Abraham. John the Baptist, who prepared Israel for the coming of Christ, lived on "locusts and wild honey." In the Book of Revelation, the little scroll "tasted like honey" in the Evangelist's mouth but turned bitter in his stomach, meaning that his call to prophecy seemed joyful at first but brought rejection later as commonly happens with prophets. The sweets we consume at Christmas remind us of the sweetness of God's Presence, come into the world on Christmas. Sweet Jesus, is there anything sweeter than you? The memory of you is more delightful than anything else. Your name is joy; it is the true gate of our salvation. What else are you, Jesus, if not our Savior? Be our Redeemer. Give us the virtues of hope and love, just as you have given us faith, our primary joy. May we live and die in them so we can attain you. With your help and through the prayers of your Mother, you who are blessed throughout the ages. Amen.

YULE LOG: A Yule log is a large log which is burned in the hearth as part of traditional Christmas celebrations. The Yule log goes back to pagan religions. Yule, which means sun or light, was a festival in honor of the sun god. The

25th of December was the birthday of the Roman god Mithras, who was known as the unconquered sun. Christians can see how the Lord used this symbol to prepare the pagans for Christ, the son of God, the eternal Light, the God of all gods. The Yule log is reminiscent of Christ's cross, made of wood. As the burning log gives light as it "dies," so the death of Christ on the cross brought our world from the darkness of sin into the light of faith. As the burning of the log was thought to bring health, fruitfulness, and prosperity and to ward off evil spirits, so Christ's sacrificial death brought to those who believe in Him the fruits of the Holy Spirit, health of soul, and prosperity in their spiritual life. Through His death, Christ conquered all evil spirits for all time. Burning the Yule log for twelve days prepared the pagans to recall the twelve tribes of Israel, which preceded Christ, and the twelve apostles whom Our Lord sent to spread the fire of the Holy Spirit to light up all the world. Lord, You do all things so well. In this pagan symbol, You foreshadowed the sacrifice of Your Son. Lord of Light and Life, may the fire of Your Love illumine my life and make me an apostle for You. Amen.

WREATH: Wreaths combine several Christmas symbols including holly, fruit, mistletoe, evergreens, tinsel, and so on, all of which retain their symbolism on the wreath. The word wreath comes from an old English word, meaning to writhe or twist. Greens twisted into a circle made "crowns" for kings, military leaders, and athletes. Because wreaths, due to their circular shape, symbolize eternity, the circle of life, and endless hope, they began to be used at Christmas and hung. Because a wreath has neither beginning nor end, but is a continuous circle, it symbolized God Himself. Lord, You are my God, uncreated and eternal Love. Draw me into the circle of Love that flows throughout the Trinity. May I find eternal life in you. Amen.

ADVENT WREATH: The Advent Wreath combines the symbolism of wreaths, evergreens, candles, and holly (if holly is used to make the wreath). In addition, the Advent wreath utilizes the symbolic colors purple and pink, the color of the priest's Advent vestments. In an Advent Wreath, three purple candles (to signify penance, prayer, and preparation for Christmas) and one pink candle (to symbolize rejoicing) are spaced equidistantly around the wreath. Each candle represents 1000 years which, taken together, equal the traditional sense of 4000 years from Adam to the birth of Christ. The purple candles are lit on the First, Second, and Fourth Sundays of Advent and the pink one on the Third Sunday, which is called Gaudete (Rejoicing) Sunday. Recently the faithful have adopted the custom of removing the colored candles on Christmas and replacing them with a white candle in the center of the

wreath. The white candle symbolizes the birth of Christ, the Light of the World and the Center of all creation. Lord, all creation awaited Your coming among us. Now we await Your second coming. Our waiting grows patience in us, Lord. May that virtue flourish in my soul this Advent and always. Amen.

CHRISTMAS COOKIES, BREADS, PASTRIES:

Christmas pastries are made with flour and remind us of the many uses of bread in Scripture. The Jewish people offered cakes made with oil to the Lord. The Israelites took their unleavened loaves with them when they fled Egypt. They recalled this event yearly in the feast of Unleavened Bread. The manna in the desert tasted like wafers made with honey. Elijah performed a miracle in which a widow's flour did not run out during a time of famine. When David brought the Ark of God back to Jerusalem, he gave each person in Israel a loaf of bread, a cut of meat, and a raisin cake. Jesus multiplied loaves twice in Scripture and came as the Bread of Life. He comes to us in every Mass under the form of Eucharistic bread and wine. This rich history is present to us with every taste of Christmas pastries. Lord, You are the Bread of Life. You sustain us and grant us spiritual health. May we partake of You and live in You.

STOCKING: The tradition of placing gifts into Christmas stockings come from another tradition regarding Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. In this tradition, the three women who needed dowries in order to be kept from a life of prostitution had hung their stockings by the fireplace to dry. When the saint came by to help them, the money that he threw into their house fortuitously landed in the stockings. The tradition of naughty children receiving a lump of coal in their stockings comes from Italy. Because stockings cover our feet, they symbolize our life's journey. If our journey takes us closer to God, He rewards us with the joys and happiness of eternal life. But if we constantly turn from Him, we will do so in eternity as well. In popular imagination, satan stokes the fires of hell with coal. Hence, coal in the stocking of naughty children is a somber reminder of damnation while the gifts good children receive foreshadow their eternal reward. Lord, all my life is a journey either toward union with You or away from it. What is my goal, my God? Direct my steps along the path You wish me to follow so that, at my journey's end, I find myself in Your eternal embrace. Amen.

REINDEER: Because Santa Claus, as an alteration of St. Nicholas, was popular in Scandinavia, reindeer became associated with him. In Scandinavian countries, reindeer are domesticated and used for meat as well as for work. Their pulling a sleigh would be a familiar sight. Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer, was a 1939 creation of Robert May who wrote

Rudolph's story as a Christmas comic book for Montgomery Ward department store. Reindeer provide an interesting example of how the Holy Spirit uses secular symbols to prepare people to accept the Divine. Reindeer recall this verse from the Psalms: "As a doe pants for running streams, so my soul is thirsting for You, my God" (*Psalms 42:1*). Isaiah uttered this prophecy about the Messiah: "Then will the lame leap like a stag" (*Isaiah 35:6*). The lover in the Song of Songs sings, "Hark! my lover—here he comes, springing across the mountains, leaping across the hills. My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag" (*Song of Songs 2:8-9*). So we long for God Who can cure our spiritual and physical ills, making our souls leap with joy and sometimes our bodies as well. Santa makes Rudolph, whom the other deer reject, the leader of the herd. His light leads them through the dark night so that gifts can be given to good children. Rudolph is a secular way to prepare children for Christ, the light of the world, Who was rejected by His people yet Whom God placed above us all. Christ not only knows and provides the spiritual light for the way to the Father, but He Himself IS the Way. Lord, You are amazing in Your greatness. Your Spirit inspired our simple minds to connect reindeer with a secular celebration of Christmas, and yet we had no idea that we were selecting symbols that draw us back to You. All things point to You, Lord, for You are Creator of all things. May I see Your Hand everywhere.

SLEIGH: The sleigh as Santa's means of transporting gifts came from Scandinavia. The word "sleigh" is a corruption of the word "sledge." Sledges were used originally to thresh grain. From Biblical times through modern ones, oxen or donkeys pull sledges across grain which is scattered on a threshing floor. The heavy wooden sledge is set with flints or iron teeth which rip the chaff or stalks from the grain. A winnower works along with the thresher, using a several-pronged pitchfork to toss the grain and chaff upward. The wind carries the light chaff away from the threshing floor while the heavier grain falls to the floor. The prophet Isaiah predicts the future glory of Israel, following the birth of the Messiah, in these words: "Do not fear, you worm Jacob, you insect Israel! I will help you, says the Lord; your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel. Now, I will make of you a threshing-sledge, sharp, new, and having teeth; you shall thresh the mountains and crush them, and you shall make the hills like chaff. You shall winnow them and the wind shall carry them away, and the tempest shall scatter them. Then you shall rejoice in the Lord; in the Holy One of Israel you shall glory (*Isaiah 41: 14-16*)." Lowly, insignificant, weak Israel (compared to a worm, an insect) will become strong by God's power, able to crush mountains (insurmountable obstacles). Only by God could such greatness be achieved. Christians see this

prophecy as being fulfilled in Christ, born in a stable to lowly parents, who has come to be the judge and savior of the world, to crush the spiritual mountains of sin and pride and to redeem us. John the Baptist clarifies this connection in his preaching at the Jordan: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (*Matthew 3: 11-12*). May we be found to be wheat when our Lord comes! Lord, when I see a Christmas sleigh, help me to look beyond it to the meaning it had in the time of Christ. Let me see You as the great Thresher of souls, You Who have the winnowing fan in Your Hand and Who separate the wheat from the chaff. May Your threshing of my life yield grain suitable for eternal life.

SNOW AND ICE: Snow and ice are associated with Christmas because December 25 occurs during winter in the Northern hemisphere. There the winter solstice on December 21 brings the shortest day of the year, after which the hours of daylight slowly begin to lengthen. Snow and ice symbolize hardness of heart and coldness toward God and others. As the sun, rising higher in the sky each day after the winter solstice, will eventually melt the ice and snow, so will the Son of God thaw our hard hearts if we turn to Him. Lord, give me the courage to seek out the hard, cold places in my spirit and to expose them over to the fire of Your Love. Amen.

FIRE: We associate a cozy hearth and a warm fire with Christmas. When people come indoors from a walk in the snow, they want to warm themselves and sitting by the fireplace was the traditional way to do that. Fire in Scripture symbolizes good sometimes and sometimes punishment. Fire reminds us the flaming, fiery sword that barred Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Fire and brimstone rained from heaven to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Fire reminds us of the burning bush where God, under the appearance of fire, spoke to Moses and commissioned him to deliver the Israelites from the Egyptians. The Holy Spirit, as a pillar of fire, led the Israelites from Egypt into the Promised Land. The Israelites burned their offerings on the temple altar as gifts to God. God sent fire from heaven to consume the offering of Elijah, to the confusion of the prophets of Baal. The prophet Elisha was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Jesus used the rubbish heap fires of Gehenna to illustrate the utter eternal but continual destruction of those who refuse to believe in God. The Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles in tongues of fire on Pentecost. The

Spirit came because Jesus, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, sent Him to us following Christ's resurrection. In the Book of Revelation, the Son of God Who stood before John appeared to be aflame with a spiritual fire, but later Satan and all his cohorts were thrown forever into a lake of eternal fire. Lord, as I warm myself by a fireplace this Christmas, may You bring to mind these images of fire that leads, comforts, and instructs and fire that destroys. Your Love is consuming fire. You want all of me for Yourself. Lord, grant me the grace to give myself to You so that my soul will burn with love and every trace of sin be consumed in me. Amen.

CHRISTMAS CAROLS: Christmas carols remind us of the angels who announced the birth of Christ by singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth!" Song has been a part of worship since the beginning. Miriam composed and sang a hymn of Thanksgiving when God delivered the Israelites from the Egyptians. David sang and danced before the Ark of the Lord when he was accompanying back to Jerusalem after having rescued it from the Philistines. He composed the Psalms, all of which are to be sung. Many of the Psalms mention times when the Jewish people sang, some of which are: bringing in the harvest, going up to the temple, success over one's enemies. Jesus mentioned funeral songs in one of His exhortations. People use song as an expression of highest emotion. How fitting that we sing about the birth of Christ! Lord, whether or not I have a good singing voice or a poor one, help me to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord" at this holy time of year! Praise You, Lord, for You have been born among us! Amen.

CHRISTMAS CARDS: Christmas cards began when school children in England drew Christmas greetings for their parents. In 1843, the first director of London's Victoria and Albert Museum commissioned an artist to create the first professional Christmas card so that he could send greetings to his friends. Christmas cards can serve as miniature Gospel tracts, reminding both sender and receiver that Christ was born at Christmas. Many beautiful, religious cards exist that share the true meaning of the Christmas season. Christmas cards also remind us that we, too, ought to be "walking and talking" messages that testify to Christ's love. Lord, help me to share the message of Christmas through the cards I send. May all that I do show Your love for me. Amen.

XMAS: While Xmas is seen by some as a secular way to "cross Christ out of Christmas," the word actually is an abbreviation for Christmas. Christ was often written as "XP" or "XT" and the Greek letter Chi X stood for Christ in the ancient Greek symbol for Christians. Lord, how can we cross You out of Christmas when the holiday exists

because of Your birth? Help us to put You into the center of our celebrations, on Christmas and every day of the year. Amen!

SNOWMAN: Snowmen are associated with Christmas in the Northern Hemisphere where snow often covers the ground at this season. Children have been making snowmen ever since time began. Just as snowmen are images of real people, so those whose spirits are frozen against the love of God are images of who they could be. As snowmen melt in the warmth of the sun and the spring, so our cold hearts will melt when we understand the Son's love and sacrifice for us. Lord, may I melt at the touch of Your Love. From my frozen spirit bring forth streams of water as my tears of repentance. Let me turn back to You, my God, so that I can become all You created me to be. Amen.

RED AND GREEN: Red is the color of holly berries and green the color of evergreens, both of which are associated with Christmas. Red reminds us of the blood of Christ, shed for our sins on Calvary, and green is the color of grass and vegetation, hence, of life. Therefore, red and green remind us of suffering and sacrifice and of the life that God has given us and that comes to us eternally through the sufferings of Christ. My Lord, You came at Christmas so that You would teach us Who You are and let us know how to love our neighbor. Then You died on Good Friday and rose at Easter. In Your life, both death and life, suffering and growth, worked together to give me life. Grant me the grace to surrender my life to You so that all my suffering and pain may result in spiritual growth, to Your glory, forever. Amen.

ANGEL: Angels are God's messengers. They appear several times in Scripture and continue to protect us today as each person has his or her own guardian angel. The angel Gabriel announced the birth of Christ and also told St. Joseph to take Jesus and Mary to Egypt to escape Herod's plan to kill the Christ Child. Angels appeared to the shepherds when Christ was born, singing and praising God and instructing the shepherds to hurry to Bethlehem to see the newborn King. Angels symbolize God's presence, and remind us of obedience to Him and praise of Him. Lord, with the angels I sing Your praise! May I be obedient to You as they are and may I bring Your message to a world that does not know how empty it is without knowledge of You. I thank You for my guardian angel and ask that I may cooperate with the graces that You give to me through my own special protector. Thank You, Lord, for all Your blessings. Amen.

And may God bless your Christmas celebrations!

*These reflections are presented by
The Confraternity of Penitents*

~ ~ ~ CATHEDRAL CALENDAR ~ ~ ~

NOVEMBER 27	FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT MATTINS 9:15 AM HIGH MASS 10:00 AM
NOVEMBER 30	ST. ANDREW THE APOSTLE ~ MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 4	SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT MATTINS 9:15 AM SUNG MASS 10:00 AM
DECEMBER 8	CONCEPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 11	THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT MATTINS 9:15 AM SUNG MASS 10:00 AM
DECEMBER 15	MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 18	FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT MATTINS 9:15 AM SUNG MASS 10:00 AM
DECEMBER 21	SAINT THOMAS THE APOSTLE MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 22	MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 24	CHRISTMAS EVE FIRST MASS OF CHRISTMAS ~ 8:00 PM
DECEMBER 25	CHRISTMAS DAY MATTINS 9:15 AM THE CHRISTMASS 10:00 AM
DECEMBER 26	SAINT STEPHEN THE PROTO-MARTYR MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 27	SAINT JOHN THE EVANGELIST MASS 9:30 AM
DECEMBER 28	THE HOLY INNOCENTS MASS 9:30 AM
JANUARY 1, 2017	OCTAVE DAY OF CHRISTMAS MATTINS 9:15 AM HIGH MASS 10:00 AM
JANUARY 6	THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD MASS 9:30 AM
JANUARY 8	FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY MATTINS 9:15 AM HIGH MASS 10:00 AM <u>PARISH EPIPHANY DINNER 11:30 AM</u>