

COUNTING DOWN TO CHRISTMAS



IN SECULAR CELEBRATIONS OF THE SEASON, counting down the days to Christmas builds children up for nothing more than a feast, a vacation from school, and a cache of presents under the tree. For adults, the countdown leads to a tremendous sigh of relief. Indeed, one of the most common countdowns today is provided for us by merchants, who solemnly warn, “Only XX shopping days until Christmas.” But for Catholics the end of Advent is not the end of holiday chores nor is its climax the festive celebration. Instead, the days that pass bring us closer to the birth of our Salvation, the Christ Child, who is the greatest Christmas gift we could ever receive.

In religious celebrations of Advent and Christmas, counting down provides us with an opportunity to slowly reflect on the mysteries and wonder of the season. There are many ways to do this. An Advent calendar focuses on the Nativity of Our Lord and on the symbols of the birth; the Jesse Tree centers on the Lord’s lineage and on salvation history. An O Antiphon House (used only the last eight days of Advent) helps us to reflect on the attributes of Christ described in the beautiful titles given to Him in these prayers. We offer some suggestions here.

THE ADVENT CALENDAR

The Advent calendar or *Adventhaus* began in Scandinavia and Germany, especially in the regions of the Palatinate and Hesse. Its purpose is to help instill in children the expectancy of Advent. There are many styles of Advent calendars available, but in many cases, the religious meaning — the joyful anticipation of the coming of the Savior — is lost.

A truly Christian Advent calendar can help children by revealing the wonders of the season one at a time. One version could be made to look like a house with small windows for each of the days of Advent and one large window to be opened Christmas Eve. Another variation is to construct a Jacob’s Ladder that leads step by step to the day of Christ’s birth.

Every morning or every evening before bedtime, the child opens a window, behind which appears a star, an angel, or some other picture appropriate to the Advent season. (If there are several children in the family, the privilege of opening the windows rotates from one to another.) A Scripture verse can serve as a caption. By December 23, all of the small windows are open; the big window remains closed until Christmas Eve, when it is opened to reveal the Holy Child in the manger.

It is not difficult to make your own Advent calendar. You can use construction paper, cardboard, or wood. You may want to place the calendar before a lamp or window so that light will shine through the windows.

Advent Calendar House

You can make an Advent house from a sheet of construction paper, with a piece of colored tissue attached to the back for window panes through which light can shine.

Draw a roofline at the top of the paper, with a chimney about midway down one side.

Then draw the 23 windows, starting about three inches from the peak of the roof, as indicated in the illustration. Make the windows about an inch square. You will notice that this house has six storeys: the top storey has three windows; the next has five; then three; then five; then three. The ground floor has two windows on each side of the door.

The outside of the house can be decorated as simply or as elaborately as you wish, with paint or markers; details like bricks, trim, flowers, etc. cut from colored papers can be applied, glitter “snow” can be added. You may want to number the shutters from 1 to 23.

Cut across the tops and bottoms of all the windows and the door; then cut down through the center of each window to make shutters.

On another piece of paper (preferably colored tissue) the same size and shape of the house, lightly indicate in pencil the position of the windows, then paste pictures of angels, shepherds, or other appropriate subjects to fit within each window. (Christmas cards are a good source for pictures.) In the doorway paste a picture of the Holy Family, or of just the baby Jesus.

Apply glue (a glue stick is good for this) to the edges of the window sheet, and press firmly to the back of the house. (Make sure the windows and door are closed but not glued shut!) You can glue a strip of firm cardboard the same length as the house to the back, like a picture frame stand; or a yarn or string can be glued or stapled to the rooftop for hanging.

Children can take turns opening the windows on the Advent house, or a separate house could be made for each child. Opening each day's window can be done at mealtime prayers, or some other regular prayer time.



Advent House

Suggested figures for the Advent calendar: The Star of Bethlehem, angels, hay, donkey, ox, shepherd, sheep, camel, bells, harp, horn, wreath (circle symbol for eternity), a symbol of the Trinity, heart (love), anchor (faith), crown (Christ the King), rose (Mary), candle, gold, frankincense, myrrh, holly (symbol of the crown of thorns), Bible or scroll, Wise Men, Mary, Joseph, and the Christ Child in the manger.

Jacob's Ladder

On a piece of poster board draw with a brown marker a long ladder with one rung for each day of Advent except the last seven. At the top of the ladder draw six cloud shapes (about the same size) and above them one larger cloud, using a blue marker. Cut around three sides of the spaces inside of the rungs (so that they can be folded down); then cut around the cloud shapes, leaving the bottom of each uncut. You may want to glue fluffs of cotton or quilt batting to the clouds.

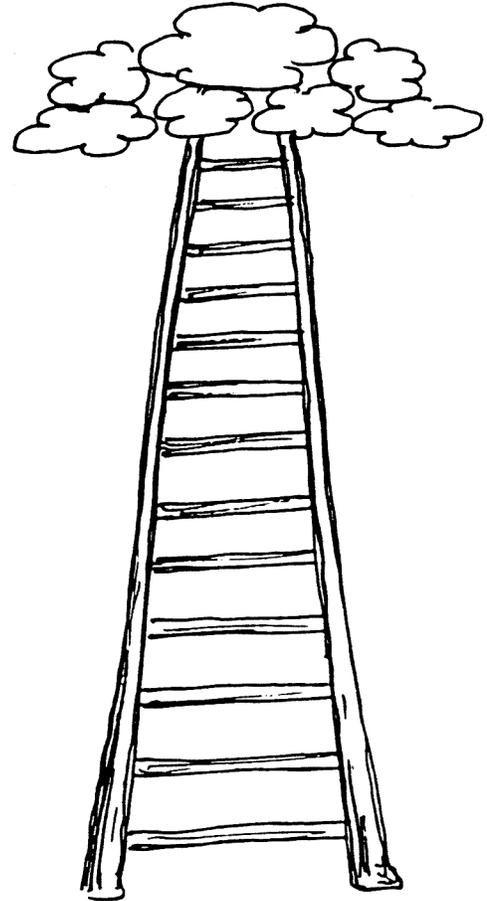
On another piece of paper the same size as the first, mark the positions of pictures to fit behind the ladder rungs and the clouds. Glue (or draw) appropriate pictures to fit within

these spaces (Baby Jesus should be behind the largest cloud); then affix it to the back of the ladder.

Symbols from the O Antiphons could be used for the clouds, and the appropriate prayer for each day could be said as each of the seven clouds is opened.

As with the Advent House, each day another "step" is taken. On the last seven days before Christmas a cloud is opened, ending on Christmas Eve with the largest.

(A variation on Maria von Trapp's Advent calendar directions in Around the Year with the Trapp Family. Pantheon, 1955.)



Jacob's Ladder

The Jesse Tree

“And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon Him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of the fear of the Lord.” (Isaiah 11:1,2)

Medieval images of the Tree of Jesse combined Isaiah’s prophecy with the gospel account in Matthew 1 of the descent of Jesus from the royal line of David. Saint Matthew’s gospel is read on Christmas day. Families also may read this chapter together on Christmas eve or Christmas morning.

The Jesse Tree was a very popular subject in medieval art. Examples of the Jesse Tree image survive in carvings, manuscripts, stained glass, and even on embroidered vestments. The tree often appears to be a vine springing from the side of the sleeping figure of Jesse, the father of David. The rod (trunk) represents the biblical genealogy of Jesus, culminating in the Virgin Mary. The branch (or flower) is Christ the Savior. These images often depicted King David holding a harp, and King Solomon holding a model of the temple at Jerusalem. Sometimes other figures — from the Old and New Testaments — were included among the side branches.

The Advent Jesse Tree, a fairly recent innovation, was developed to help Catholic families “put Christ back into Christmas” by studying His genealogy. It has often been used in schools as well as in homes. The ornaments placed on the Jesse Tree represent the ancestors of our Lord, Christ Himself, Old Testament foreshadowing of Christ’s sufferings, and Old Testament personages who prefigure Christ’s life and His coming.

A home Jesse Tree may be a small bare or evergreen branch set in a sand-filled flowerpot or decorated coffee can. A tree could also be made of felt, poster board, or wood (buttons or bells could be attached to hold the ornaments.) The tree is ornamented with a symbol and/or Scripture verse for each day of Advent. A list is suggested below, but there are many additional possibilities.

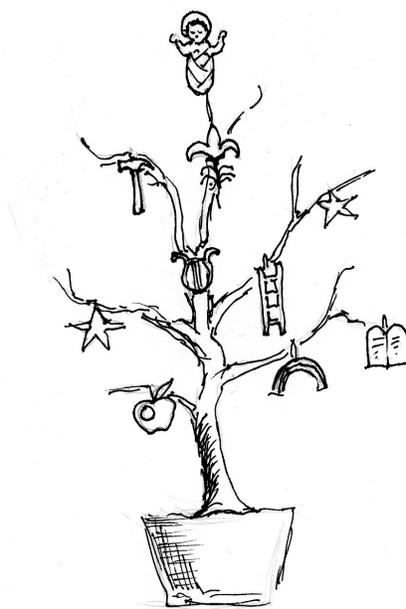
During each evening in Advent, a child may place a symbol on the tree. The child (or an older child or parent, if he is too young) then reads the appropriate Scripture text and explains its significance in Salvation History.

Symbols and Verses for the Jesse Tree:

Twenty-seven suggested subjects for the Jesse Tree are listed below, along with symbols and Scripture text citations. You may need more or fewer, depending on the

length of Advent in a given year. The final eight days are the same every year, and the last symbol placed on the tree, of course, is always the Infant Jesus, the newborn King.

1. Creation — Gen. 1:1-31; 2:1-4
Symbols: sun, moon, stars, animals, globe of the earth
 2. Adam and Eve — Gen. 2:7-9, 18-24
Symbols: tree, man, woman
 3. Fall of man — Gen. 3:1-7, 23-24
Symbols: tree, serpent, apple with bite
 4. Noah — Gen. 6:5-8, 13-22; 7:16, 23, 24; 8:1, 6-12
Symbols: ark, animals, dove, rainbow
 5. Abraham — Gen. 12:1-3; 13:2-18
Symbols: torch, sword, mountain, tent, many stars
 6. Isaac — Gen. 22:1-14
Symbols: an altar, ram in bush, bundle of sticks (for lighting a fire) in the form of a cross
 7. Jacob — Gen. 25:1-34; 28:10-15
Symbol: ladder
 8. Joseph — Gen. 37:3-4, 12-24, 28
Symbols: bucket, well, silver coins, coat of many colors, sheaf of wheat
 9. Moses — Ex. 2:1-10; 20:1-17
Symbols: baby in basket, river and rushes, stone tablets
 10. Aaron — Num. 6:22-27
Symbols: rod and serpent
 11. Samuel — Sam. 3:1-18
Symbols: lamp, temple
 12. Jesse — I Sam. 16:1-13; Is. 11:1
Symbol: shepherd’s staff
 13. David — I Sam. 16:14-23; 17:12-51
Symbols: slingshot, harp, crown
 14. Solomon — I Kings 3:3-28
Symbols: scales of justice, temple, two babies and sword, crown
 15. Isaiah — Is. 6:1-8
Symbols: scroll, tongs and coal
 16. Anne and Joachim
Symbols: flowering rod, baby girl
 17. Zechariah and Elizabeth — Lk. 1:68-79
Symbols: small chalk board inscribed “His name is John”
 18. Joseph — Mt. 1:18-25
Symbols: hammer, saw, chisel, angle
 19. Mary — Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:26-38
Symbols: lily, crown of stars, pierced heart
 20. John the Baptist —
Symbols: shell with water, river
- Eight days before Christmas, the O Antiphons begin in anticipation of our Savior’s birth:*
21. O Wisdom — Sirach 24:2; Wisdom 8:1
Symbols: oil lamp, open book
 22. O Lord — Ex. 3:2; 20:1
Symbols: burning bush, stone tablets



23. O Flower of Jesse — Is. 11:1-3
 Symbols: flower, plant with flower
24. O Key of David — Is. 22:22
 Symbols: key, broken chains
25. O Radiant Dawn — Ps. 19:6-7
 Symbols: sunrise
26. O King of the Gentiles — Ps. 2:7-8; Eph. 2:14-20
 Symbols: crown, scepter
27. O Emmanuel — Is. 7:14; 33:22
 Symbols: tablets of stone, chalice and host

The O Antiphon House

On the evening of December 17 the final phase of preparation begins with the first of the great O Antiphons of Advent. These prayers are seven jewels of liturgical song, one for each day until Christmas Eve. They seem to sum up all our Advent longing for the Savior.

The O Antiphons are intoned with special solemnity in monasteries at Vespers, before and after the *Magnificat*, Mary's prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is sung every evening

as the climax of this Hour of the Divine Office.

In recent years families interested in the liturgy have discovered these gems of poetry and have used them as part of their family evening prayers, sometimes in conjunction with an O Antiphon house. This is a little house with seven windows, each concealing an appropriate symbol for the different O Antiphons, and an eighth window hiding the Nativity scene.

(For suggested symbols for the O Antiphon house, see the list of Jesse Tree symbols.)

As with an Advent calendar, one window is opened each day as the antiphon is changed. With its more sublime meditation, the "Great Os" would be excellent for families with children who have outgrown the Jesse Tree or Advent calendar. In any case, they are beautiful additions to your family prayers in the days just before Christmas.

The O Antiphons in English translation are below.

THE O ANTIPHONS

O WISDOM, who came from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: Come, and teach us the way of prudence.

O LORD AND RULER of the House of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the flame of the burning bush and gave him the law on Sinai: Come, and redeem us with outstretched arm.

O ROOT OF JESSE, who stands for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence and unto whom the Gentiles shall make supplication: Come to deliver us, and tarry not.

O KEY OF DAVID, and Scepter of the House of Israel, who opens and no man shuts, who shuts and no man opens: Come, and bring forth the captive from his prison, he who sits in darkness and in the shadow of death.

O DAWN OF THE EAST, brightness of the light eternal, and Sun of Justice: Come, and enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

O KING OF THE GENTILES and their desired One, the Cornerstone that makes both one: Come, and deliver man, whom You formed out of the dust of the earth.

O EMMANUEL, God with us, our King and Lawgiver, the expected of the nations and their Savior: Come to save us, O Lord our God.