Seven traditions for the heart of Advent

The last two weeks of Advent are laden with celebrations both traditional and popular, making it one of the most action-packed few weeks of the Church year. Here are seven traditional practices your family might want to try during the "heart" of Advent, or at least acknowledge in some small way. Don't feel pressured to try them all—choose one or two, leaving some time for quiet prayer and anticipation. (We've got some suggestions for that, too.)

December 12 | Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe

The feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe recalls the appearance in 1531 of the Virgin Mary to St. Juan Diego, a native who had recently converted to Catholicism, at a place called Tepeyac in what is now Mexico City. The Virgin asked that a church be built on the site. The local bishop was skeptical of Juan Diego's story, however, and requested a sign that the request was really divine in origin. The Virgin offered the bishop several signs, beginning with the out-of-season and non-native Castillian roses that she gave to Juan to present to the bishop. When the roses tumbled from Juan's tilma (or mantle), they revealed a miraculous image of the Virgin on Juan's garment. Later, Juan's uncle testified that the Virgin had appeared to him as well, curing him when he had been on the point of death.

You can find a kid-friendly story about St. Juan Diego, as well as ways to celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, at Celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe with Your Kids. And make a fun fish taco recipe.

December 13 | Feast of St. Lucy

Lucia of Syracuse (283–304) was a young Christian

martyr. Later accounts of her martyrdom included a story about her eyes getting gouged out; that, along with the date of her feast, led to the celebration of her feast as a festival of light, especially in Scandinavian cultures.

Catholic Culture provides detailed plans for a St. Lucy party, and Shower of Roses offers a wealth of ideas for celebrating St. Lucy Day with crafts, coloring pages, food, and song.

People in Italy marked the feast day with torchlight processions and bonfires, according to Fish Eaters, along with a cooked wheat porridge known as cuccia. According to legend, ships laden with grain arrived in the city of Syracuse on her feast day, ending a famine there.

"All over southern Italy country people eat bowls of nutty-tasting whole-wheat kernels with creamy ricotta, sweet honey and dried fruit to celebrate the feast of Santa Lucia on December 13 and the planting of the new wheat," according to the Splendid Table, which offers a yummy cuccia recipe

December 14 | Feast of St. John of the Cross

John of the Cross, together with St. Teresa of Avila, reformed the Carmelite order in the sixteenth century. He is also well-known for his spiritual writings, which had an enormous impact on the development of the Catholic contemplative tradition as well as other outstanding religious figures who came after him, including St. Therese of Lisieux and St. John Paul II.

"Among the Church's contemplatives, St. John is one of the acknowledged masters of mystical theology," says Catholic Culture. "Indeed, perhaps no other writer has had greater influence on Catholic spirituality."

A spiritual and literary heavyweight, his works include *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *Dark Night of the Soul*, *Living Flame of Love*, and *Spiritual Canticle*, among others.

While he may not be the most kid-friendly saint, precocious teens might appreciate his spirituality. *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross* by Ian Matthews offers an accessible introduction to the saint's spirituality.

Gaudete Sunday

The third Sunday of Advent is Gaudete Sunday. The Latin word *gaudete* means "rejoice," and that is what we do on this day: We rejoice because we are more than halfway through Advent, and the coming of Christ is near. We light the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath rather than a purple one as a sign that we are taking a brief break from penitential practices. (Advent got its start as a season of penance, like Lent, and purple is the color of repentance.)

Have your kids look for the rose-colored candle at church, as well as the priest's rose-colored vestments. They can also listen for references to joy and rejoicing in the readings, prayers, and music during Mass.

December 16 | Las Posadas

Las Posadas is a nine-day celebration that had its origins in Spain, but is now widely practiced in Latin America. *Posadas* means "lodging"; the celebration is chiefly a re-enactment of Mary and Joseph's search for lodging in Bethlehem, and underlines the Christian importance of offering hospitality. Las Posadas mark the nine-day Novena that leads up to Christmas day. They began in Spain as a preparation for the celebration and were picked up by the cultures of Mexico, Guatemala, and other Latin American cultures some 400 years ago.

The celebration usually consists of a procession of people accompanying Mary and Joseph (played by a couple, sometimes riding a real donkey) as they travel from house to house, or church to church, seeking lodging. As they go, the group sings a traditional song seeking lodging at each house or church; at

each place, they are refused (again by song), until at the last place, they are finally given lodging. Everyone enters the home (or church) and prays the rosary before a Nativity scene; the time of prayer is followed by festivities.

Here's a video of the Los Posadas song, translated into English; even if you don't celebrate Los Posadas, the song is worth playing for your kids:

If you decide to do Los Posadas on a small scale in your home, provide Mexican food and perhaps a piñata. Better yet, organize a larger party in your neighborhood or parish.

Alternatively, enjoy this read-aloud of Tomie dePaola's delightful picture book, *The Night of Los Posadas.*

December 16 | Christmas Novena

Novenas are a traditional pious devotion in which special prayers are said for nine consecutive days, often for the intercession of a saint, the Virgin Mary, or one of the persons of the Trinity. Many people pray a special Christmas Novena beginning nine days before Christmas.

The University of Dayton's International Marian Research Institute offers both an explanation of the origins of the Christmas novena, as well as one of the best texts available online. "Father Charles Vachetta, pastor of the Church of the Immaculate in Turin, Italy, wanted to give his parishioners something special for the Advent of 1721," the institute's website says. "He wanted them to understand the intertwining of the Old and New Testaments so they could see for themselves the love of God unfold from the beginning of time and for all eternity. Father Vachetta decided to give them the gift of a novena—a prayer going deep into the spirit of Advent, leaving one inspired with inexpressible joy. So Father Vachetta began

to write his nine-day prayer, to stir the hearts of his parishioners to eagerly await the coming of Christ." You can read the rest of the story at the website.

For a family-friendly Christmas novena prayer service, head over to Catholic Culture.

December 17 | O Antiphons

The O Antiphons are an ancient liturgical antiphon (response) sung or recited during the last seven days of Advent (one each day from December 17 through December 23) as part of the Liturgy of Hours. (The Liturgy of Hours is the way the Church prays throughout the day.)

No one knows the exact origin of the O Antiphons, but Christians have been singing them since at least the fifth century. You might recognize some of the words, because the O Antiphons are the basis of the popular hymn O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

You can pray the O Antiphons with your family with the help of O Antiphons • Prayers for Catholic Kids, which includes the text of the antiphons, a video of the antiphons being sung, and a key to help you decode the Scripture to which each antiphon refers.

This video explains the O Antiphons in the context of a kid-friendly story about the longing of the people of Israel for a savior:

Find the quiet center of Advent

Feeling overwhelmed by all that's going on in the run-up to Christmas, both in the Church and in your home? The heart of Advent is a great time to help your family find the quiet center from which to truly prepare your hearts to welcome

Jesus. Try these ideas:

- Pray thirty seconds of silence for family prayer if you have young children, or longer if you have older ones. Light your Advent wreath during your time of silence, or light a candle before your Nativity scene (without the baby Jesus) and kneel before it in silent prayer for a time.
- Turn your home into a “monastery” for a night by lighting candles everywhere (out of reach of curious kids)…as long as little kids can be quiet as monks.
- Don’t play the radio in the car.
- Visit your church or adoration chapel for a time of quiet prayer.
- Go on a walk outdoors in a park or another place where you can appreciate the quiet and simplicity of the natural world.
- Have a “quiet meal” together, playing chant or meditative music instead of talking.