

The Advent angel: A Catholic alternative to Elf on the Shelf

Have you heard about – or maybe you own – an Elf on the Shelf? This toy version of Santa’s helper resides in your home during the weeks before Christmas and observes and reports back nightly to Santa whether the children are “naughty or nice.” In addition, the elves create mischief overnight – as recorded in countless social media posts by parents.

From the start, I haven’t had a good feeling about this elf. Don’t get me wrong, I do love Christmas elves. One of my dearest Christmas traditions is putting out the three elves I have had since I was a child. I love Christmas magic. I have seen the excitement in my second graders searching the classroom where we meet for religious education for the elf hidden by the classroom teacher. (True confession: both because I find it too distracting for the kids and I am not an elf supporter this year, I will remove the elf before the kids arrive and put him back in place after my class leaves.)

Naughty or nice, gifts are given out of love

Why don’t I like this elf? The Elf on the Shelf fad started when my son was older, so I never faced pressure to have one. As a Catholic parent I would say primarily the emphasis on being “nice” just because you are being watched and only for a season of the year. Do we not want our kids to do the right thing for the sake of it being right and not out of fear of being caught (and being tattled on)?

Further, we know gifts are given out of love: “God loved us first,” as Scripture says (1 John 4:19). I dislike emphasizing the “you get a present because you do good things” aspect of a tattling elf. Others have mentioned they just find it creepy

to be spied on day and night, or that this is disconcerting for their kids. Finally, the elves' overnight shenanigans have become almost a competitive sport for some parents. But do we really want to encourage mischief? How about instead we encourage good deeds?

A Catholic alternative: An Advent Angel that leaves messages from God and encourages acts of kindness

I would like to offer some alternatives to the Elf on the Shelf that keep the same sense of Christmas magic but with a more positive twist. How about an Advent Angel? One of my friends did an angel last year instead of the elf, which I like for many reasons. An Advent Angel represents clear Christian symbolism, and there is the connection to the angels in the biblical accounts of the Annunciation and the Nativity.

Advent Angel Ideas

Here are several ideas to have fun with your Advent Angel:

- The angel could arrive with a "letter of introduction" explaining about who angels are and where their stories are in the Bible.
- The angel could leave a book about angels one day or a note encouraging your children to pray to their guardian angel.
- Angels are God's messengers, so they could leave Advent messages. They could leave a Scripture verse or Bible storybook. They could suggest an Advent act of kindness (either a specific deed, or challenge kids to do a random act of kindness). They could propose an Advent activity like watching a Christmas movie, making an ornament or craft, creating a Christmas card for a grandparent or someone special or anything else you have planned.
- Take the daily prompts from something like the [Loyola](#)

[Press Advent Calendar](#) and use those as daily notes, including mentioning saints' feast days. Searching the internet will turn up lists of both Advent Scriptures and suggested Advent acts of kindness for kids that you can print out to easily adapt into notes.

- Or, if you want to stick with the elf theme, then just buy any elf and call him the "Advent Elf." You can make any angel or elf into an "Advent angel" or "Advent elf": it might be an elaborate tree topper, or one from a dollar store.
- Make your own rules: The bonus of creating your own family Advent Angel (or Advent Elf) is you get to make your own rules. You can create customs that work for you and your family. Make it as simple or involved as you like. Your angel can move to a new hiding place every day or only every few days, or never. They could move closer each day to your Nativity set. If you have a Jesse tree, they could sit under it. How often they leave messages, and what kind of messages they leave, are up to you. They leave whatever combination of messages, small gifts or treats you determine. There is no outside pressure about what your children have heard about what other elves are up to, and no pressures to stage elaborate elf pranks.