

# CHRIST AT THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

Prayers & Rituals

PART ONE  
CHRISTMAS EVE



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And all went to be enrolled, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem: because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary his espoused wife, who was with Child.

Matthew 2:3-5



# 1. THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTMAS

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

## THE LOST SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS

Over the centuries, the idea and spirit of Christmas has been deformed and destroyed—to the point where the spiritual takes second place to the material; where the food of the world takes precedence over the Bread of Heaven; where receiving gifts comes before giving gifts, especially giving Christ a gift on His birthday. We need to convert and change our false, sentimental, worldly ideas of Christmas back to the true idea and purpose of Christmas.

## A BABE WITH A SWORD!

A Babe—a new born Babe—but more than a mere babe! This is a fiery Babe Who has come with a sword! Could we call it the Sword of Christmas? We speak of peace at Christmas, but this Babe will later say: *“Do not think that I came to send peace upon Earth: I came not to send peace, but the sword!”* (Matthew 10:34).

## HE COMES TO DIVIDE!

He will then go on to say: *“For I came to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man’s enemies shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me. And he that taketh not up his cross, and followeth Me, is not worthy of Me. He that findeth his life, shall lose it: and he that shall lose his life for Me, shall find it”* (Matthew 10:35-39).

## A FIERY BABE!

Fiery talk, eh? This Divine Babe will later add: *“I am come to cast fire on the Earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled? Think ye, that I am come to give peace on Earth? I tell you, no; but separation. For there shall be, from henceforth, five in*

one house divided: three against two, and two against three.” (Luke 12:49-52).

### A PAINFUL PRESENT FOR HIS MOTHER

That sword would even strike His most Holy Mother, as Simeon would prophesy to Our Lady not many days after the birth of this Babe—*“Behold this Child is set for the fall, and for the resurrection of many in Israel, and for a sign which shall be contradicted; and thy own soul a sword shall pierce!”* (Luke 2:34-35).

Simeon already speaks for the Divine Babe a short while after the first Christmas—saying exactly what the adult Jesus would later say—this Child will be a cause of division: the rise of some and fall of others. We have here, as Simeon says, a “contradiction”—which comes from two Latin words: *contra* meaning against and *dicere*, or *dictus*, meaning to speak or spoken. This Divine Babe will be “spoken against”—not just that, but this Babe will be plotted against, worked against, fought against and finally caught, tortured and killed! This Babe comes to die! But through His death, He will not only live again, but offer eternal life to us!

### HE COMES TO PAY, NOT PLAY!

He does not come to play, but to pay—He comes to pay for our sins.

He does not come to enjoy life, but to give eternal life—but that eternal life comes at a price.

He comes not to live on Earth forever, but to forever detach us from this Earth.

He prefers poverty over power; humility over honors; rejection over riches and suffering over splendor.

His way is not our way, yet He Who called Himself *“the Way”* shows us wayward wayfarers the true way—and it is not a pleasant way, but the Way of the Cross. He will already carry that Cross from His infancy. Both the Crib of Bethlehem and the Cross of Calvary are made of rough wood, and He would have us carry it after Him.

devotiontoourlady.com wishes you a Merry and “Mary” Christmas!

### CHRISTMAS IS A RESCUE MISSION

This is the purpose of Christmas—it is the beginning of the rescue mission. He comes not to party—but to fight for our souls. What He would later say of St. John the Baptist, is all the more applicable and true of Himself—just substitute the word “cave” for the word “desert”.

### NOT A ‘SOFTEE’

Jesus said: *“What went ye out into the desert to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went you out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Behold they that are in costly clothing and live delicately, are in the houses of kings. But what went you out to see? A prophet? Yea, I say to you, and more than a prophet! This is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold I send my angel before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee!’ For I say to you: amongst those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist!”* (Luke 7:24-28).

### OUR WAYS ARE NOT HIS WAY

This Divine Babe chose a cave, not a court of a king into which to be born. This Divine Babe may have trembled with cold in the winter wind, but He refused to be shaken like a reed in the political wind that would come later. This Divine Babe was bound tight in swaddling clothes and not in rich and fashionable clothing, with a brand name like Levis. This Divine Babe would live in poverty and not in the houses of kings. This Divine Babe was laid on the wood of the manger to teach us about the wood of the Cross, which prepares the way for our salvation—the way of the cross. This Divine Babe carries His cross from Day One! A beautiful read over Christmas would be a book entitled *The Crib and the Cross*.

—He comes now in mercy, so that we might find His mercy before we find His justice at His second coming!

—He comes to cure now, so that He does not have to amputate later!

—He comes to enlighten our minds now, so that we do not end up in eternal darkness later!



## BLIND TO THE LIGHT

Yet the danger is that we fail to fully grasp the purpose of His coming and His teaching—as St. John says at the start of his Gospel which, in the liturgy we call the “Last Gospel” and hear at the end of each Mass—*“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness ... The true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world ... and the darkness did not comprehend it ... He was in the world ... and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not”* (John 1:4-11).

## SEEK AND SAVE

When the Pharisees would later complain *“to His disciples: ‘Why doth your Master eat with publicans and sinners?’ But Jesus hearing it, said: ‘They that are in health need not a physician, but they that are ill. Go then and learn what this meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice. For I am not come to call the just, but sinners!’* (Matthew 9:11-13). *“The Son of man came not to destroy souls, but to save!”* (Luke 9:56). *“For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost”* (Luke 19:10). *“For I came not to judge the world, but to save the world”* (John 12:47).

## SONS OF THUNDER OR MERCY?

When this Divine Infant became a Man and Teacher, even the Apostles did not fully grasp the purpose of His coming and His teaching. And among the guilty ones are even Jesus’ favorite three: Peter, James and John! The latter, James and John, called the Sons of Thunder in Scripture, wanted fire and brimstone to rain down from Heaven on those who just won’t listen to Jesus, who had *“sent messengers before His face. And going, they entered into a city of the Samaritans, to prepare for Him. And they received Him not, because His face was of one going to Jerusalem. And when His disciples James and John had seen this, they said: ‘Lord, wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from Heaven, and consume them?’ And turning, He rebuked them, saying: ‘You know not of what spirit you are! The Son of man came not to destroy souls, but to save!’”* (Luke 9:52-56).

## FORGIVE TO BE FORGIVEN

Peter had to be instructed in the ways of mercy, for *“Peter came unto Him and said: ‘Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? As much as seven times?’ Jesus saith to him: ‘I say not to thee, till seven times; but till seventy times seven times!’”*

He then proceeds to tell Peter the parable about the unjust steward, who had a massive debt canceled by his master, but then refused to cancel a tiny debt of a fellow steward—for which injustice the master calls him back, withdraws his merciful forgiveness of the debt and casts him into prison until he pay it all. Then Jesus adds: *“So also shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not everyone his brother from your hearts.”* (Matthew 18:21-35).

*“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy”* (Matthew 5:7). *“The just are merciful and show mercy”* (Proverbs 13:13). *“Judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy”* (James 2:13).

## THEY JUST DON’T UNDERSTAND!

Jesus Himself would later say to all His Apostles: *“Do you not yet know nor understand? Have you still your heart blinded? Having eyes, see you not? And having ears, hear you not?”* (Mark 8:17-18). He then says to the Apostle Philip: *“I have been so long a time with you; and have you not known Me?”* (John 14:9).

Even today, there are many Catholics—even well-intentioned ones—who do not truly comprehend Him, do not truly know Him, nor truly understand Him, nor truly receive Him. They, like so many others in times past, partially comprehend Him, partially know Him, partially understand Him and partially receive Him. As God said through Jeremias: *“Hear, O foolish people, and without understanding: who have eyes, and see not: and ears, and hear not!”* (Jeremias 5:21).

## OUR OWN MAN-MADE RELIGION

This partial knowledge, partial understanding, partial reception leads us make up our own ver-

sion of the true religion—much like the Pharisees had done. This Divine Infant would later say of these—both Pharisees and us: *"This people honoureth Me with their lips: but their heart is far from Me!"* (Matthew 15:8).

Will that be our Christmas? A partial Christmas? A partial understanding of it? A partial practice of it? Has that been our Christmas in bygone years? To honor and praise Him with our lips, while our hearts are submerged in some of material aspect of Christmas or the externals of Christmas?

### LET HIM ENLIGHTEN YOUR DARKNESS

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, in the Divine Office, we had the following antiphons: *"Behold, our Lord cometh with power, and He shall enlighten the eyes of His servants. Alleluia."* (Psalm 148). And as St. Zachary, the father of St. John the Baptist, said: *"To enlighten them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death"* (Luke 1:79).

### SUPERFICIAL LIGHT

This Divine Babe would echo the words of St. John's Gospel later in life: *"I am the light of the world! He that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness, but shall have the light of life!"* (John 8:12). We look around during this Christmas season and we see plenty of lights—maybe so many lights that we are tempted to say to the *"Light of the world"* that is born for us—*"We have enough lights already! We don't need any more lights, thank you!"*

All these lights are superficial, or at least external. They are fine if they reflect the light within—but they are pointless if there is darkness within. Our Lord comes to give light, to enlighten our minds and lighten our burdens—just as, at the Paschal Vigil at Easter, the big Paschal Candle, which represents Christ, gives light to candles of the clergy and the laity. He has come to give light!

Now light—until the advent of electricity—was primarily the light of fire, of the flame of fire. This is why we see God choose fire to symbolize Himself. God appears to Moses in the burning

bush; later, all the Israelites see Mount Sinai is on fire with the presence of God; for forty years He leads them through the desert under the form of a pillar of fire; the Holy Ghost comes upon the Apostles under the form of tongues of fire; the Sacred Heart appears to St. Margaret Mary with flames of fire shooting out from His Heart.

It is not for nothing that Jesus says in the New Testament: *"I am come to cast fire on the Earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled?"* (Luke 12:49). A fire can be started from a tiny spark and this babe is that tiny spark of fire, born to communicate that spark to us—to inflame us, to—as we say in the prayer to the Holy Ghost—*"endkindle in us the fire of Thy love!"*

Thus, fire and flame not only symbolizes light—but it also symbolizes love. That fire, sparked in our soul by the divine babe, is meant to not only catch fire, but to become a blazing fire of love. We can have the fire of flame of Faith, but even the devil in the fires of Hell believes in God. That Faith—or knowledge of God—is meant to grow into charity. Charity is the fully raging fire—Faith and Hope are, in a very loose sense, the stages that the fire progresses through.

### KNOW-ALLS, BUT LOVELESS

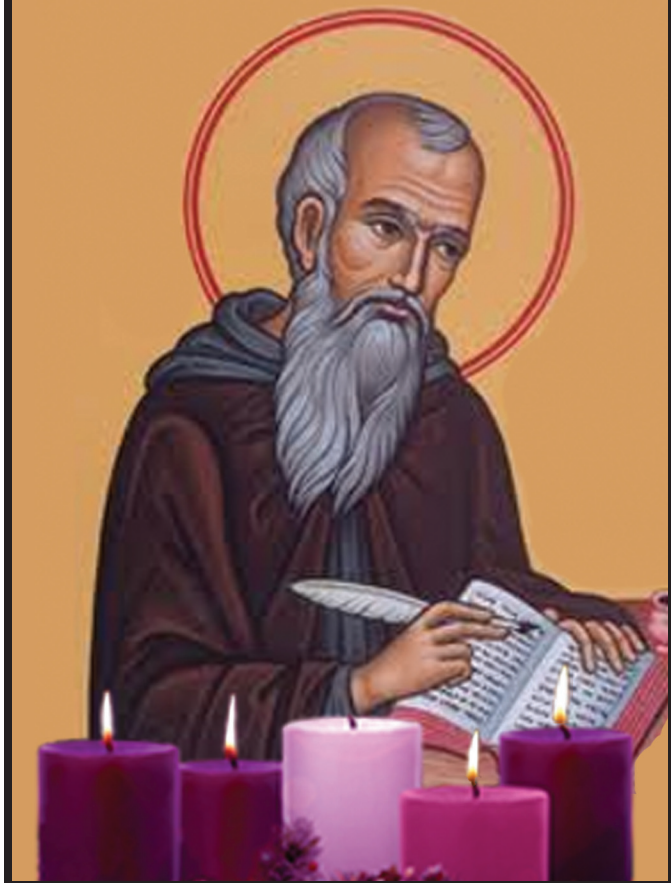
Today, too many persons prize and place knowledge above charity—their main focus is to know more and more and more. The internet fuels this fire. Yet we must remember the warnings from *The Imitation of Christ*: *"The more you know and the better you understand, the more severely will you be judged, unless your life is also the more holy. Do not be proud, therefore, because of your learning or skill. Rather, fear, because of the talent given you. If you think you know many things and understand them well enough, realize at the same time that there is much you do not know. Hence, do not affect wisdom, but admit your ignorance. Why prefer yourself to anyone else, when many are more learned, more cultured than you? If you wish to learn and appreciate something worthwhile, then love to be unknown and considered as nothing. Truly to know and despise self is the best and most perfect counsel"* (Book 1, chapter 2).



WHAT PRESENT  
WILL YOU GIVE  
JESUS THIS  
CHRISTMAS?

WHAT DOES HE  
WANT THE MOST?

ST. JEROME



## 2. CHRISTMAS EVE MEETING OF SAINT JEROME & CHRIST

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

### JEROME MEETS JESUS IN BETHLEHEM

The well-known story of St. Jerome should be an encouragement to us. About four centuries after the birth of Christ, after many years spent in Jerusalem translating the Word of God from various different Bibles into what would be later known as the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible, St. Jerome had finished his grand project just days before Christmas. To celebrate this great forty-year long accomplishment, Jerome decided to spend Christmas Eve in nearby Bethlehem. He longed to venerate the place where Christ was born. He comes to the cave of the Nativity, where he humbly prays. He himself speaks later on about the divine experience he had.

According to the ancient account, sometime around midnight Jesus appeared to him, saying: *“Jerome, what will you give Me for My birthday?”*

Immediately and enthusiastically, Jerome declared, *“Lord, I give You my translation of Your word!”*

But instead of congratulating him, Jesus simply replied, *“No, Jerome, that is not what I want.”*

St. Jerome was speechless. Then he began to complain and remonstrate with Jesus, asking why He had let him go on for forty years, far from home, laboring at something other than what God most wanted from him. But Jesus remained silent. Jerome started suggesting other ways of honoring Jesus’ birthday—fasting, becoming a hermit, giving his possessions to the poor.

To each of these Jesus replied, *“No. Jerome. That is not what I want most.”*

St. Jerome then pleaded: *"Oh Lord, You know that it is for You I have abandoned everything ... both the court of the rulers, and the majesties of Rome, and the pleasures and the riches... and at this time my mind, my whole heart, my thoughts and even my life, everything belongs to You! What else could I give You? I don't have anything else to give you today on Your on this feast day of Your birth!"*

Jesus replied: *"You still have something to give Me, Jerome! You have something which you have forgotten and today I want you to place it at My feet."*

Finally, Jerome protested, *"What is that, my Lord? Please tell me! Do I truly have something else to give you? Would I be so evil as to keep something for myself! Tell me, dear Lord, what is there that I can still give You?"* Tell me, Lord! Tell me what would give You the most joy on your birthday, and You shall have it!"

*"Do you promise, Jerome?"* asked Our Lord.

*"Yes, Lord, anything at all!"* cried Jerome.

Jesus replied, *"Give Me your sins!"*

*"My sins, O Lord? What would You do with my sins?"* asked a bewildered Jerome.

*"Jerome, give Me all your sins, so that I can forgive them all."*

Hearing this, St. Jerome broke down into tears of emotion, happiness and love at the merciful words of Jesus.



*"Give me your sins."* In His limitless humility, more than any service we can render Him, the Lord considers it a gift that we "allow" Him to take away our sins. Why? Precisely because He thirsts for us, because He longs for union with us, and the only obstacle to that union is our sin – which, in His eyes, then, becomes the most precious gift we can offer.

### **Hope and Confidence in God**

Sometimes, the sight of our many sins can induce despondency, or even despair. That is not

the work of God, but of the devil. God loves the sinner, but hates the sin. If you can arrive at that same hatred of sin, then there is nothing to worry about—no matter how great or frequent those sins may have been! Our Lord Himself said: *"For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost!"* (Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11). *"But the Pharisees and Scribes murmured, saying to His disciples: Why do you eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering, said to them: 'They that are whole need not the physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the just, but sinners to penance!'"* (Luke 5:30-32).

### **There Is No Sin That Cannot Be Forgiven**

*"If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool"* (Isaias 1:18). All God wants is repentance and sorrow for past sin. *"If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, and keep all my commandments, and do judgment and justice, living he shall live and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done: in his justice which he hath wrought, he shall live. Is it my will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live?...Because he considereth and turneth away himself from all his iniquities which he hath wrought, he shall surely live, and not die....Be converted, and do penance for all your iniquities: and iniquity shall not be your ruin. Cast away from you all your transgressions, by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit"* (Ezechiel 18:21-31).

### **Rise to a New Life**

The Sacrament of Confession casts away our transgressions and gives us a new heart and a new spirit. It is a spiritual resurrection. We enter the "tomb" of the confessional and leave our sins and guilt there, emerging as a new person, having put off the "old man" and put on the new—as St. Paul says: *"To put off...the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in spirit of your mind: and put on the new man..."* (Ephesians 4:22-23).



## The Mercies of God Are Above all His Works

It is of capital importance that we never ever let our past sins—no matter how great or filthy they may have been—come between God and ourselves, or make us in any way doubt God's love, friendship and mercy. As the Psalmist says: *"The Lord is gracious and merciful: patient and plenteous in mercy. The Lord is sweet to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works"* (Psalm 144:8-9). God does not do things by halves. When He forgives sins, He forgives completely. Their guilt is blotted out entirely and He will not reproach us with them again. Yet, His generosity goes even further. When a soul falls into mortal sin, all the merits from its past life are lost. If, however, the soul repents and obtains pardon, these merits revive again. Such is God's generosity and love.

This is a point of great importance. There is always a great temptation to discouragement and distrust, even after our sins have been forgiven. We feel that God still holds our sins against us; that His providence will be less favorable to us in the future; we feel that He no longer trusts us and that He will be reserved and sparing in His granting of graces. We imagine, too, that no matter how great our progress may be in the future, the ultimate result will always be spoiled by that unfortunate past.

All that is natural—but it is also quite wrong! It is based upon a wrong notion of God. God loves to bring good out of evil. He did so with St. Paul, with Mary Magdalen, with St. Augustine, with St. John of God, with the Ven. Matthew Talbot and many, many more. It is our lack of confidence that places obstacles in the way. Many sins were forgiven Mary Magdalen, because she loved much. If we love Him as she did, our sins will be forgiven us; and we can be more pleasing to God by a life of ardent love after our sin, than the lukewarm life of our previous innocence. Truly God can bring good out of evil!

## To Obtain Mercy, We Must Show Mercy

At the sermon on the Mount, Our Lord stated: *"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy"* (Matthew 5:7). If we want mercy, we

have to show mercy. *"The just are merciful and show mercy"* (Proverbs 13:13).

We pray: *"Forgive us our trespasses"* but perhaps wish that we could omit the next part: *"as we forgive those who trespass against us."* The perennial human problem of not *"What is good for the goose is good for the gander"*, but rather *"What is good for me, is not good for anyone else—unless I say so!"* We want mercy badly, but we are often bad about showing mercy to others. But Scripture says: *"Judgment without mercy to him that hath not done mercy"* (James 2:13). The parable of the Unmerciful Servant, serves as warning to us. Just before this parable, *"Peter came unto Him and said: 'Lord, how often shall my brother offend against me, and I forgive him? Seven times?' Jesus said to him: 'I say not to thee, seven times; but seventy times seven times."*

*"Therefore is the kingdom of Heaven likened to a king, who would take an account of his servants. One was brought to him, that owed him ten thousand talents. And as he had not wherewith to pay it, his lord commanded that he should be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. But that servant falling down, besought him, saying: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all!' And the lord of that servant being moved with pity, let him go and forgave him the debt."*

*"But when that servant was gone out, he found one of his fellow servants that owed him an hundred pence: and laying hold of him, throttled him, saying: 'Pay what thou owest!' And his fellow servant falling down, besought him, saying: 'Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all!' And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he paid the debt. Then his lord called him; and said to him: 'Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all the debt! Shouldst not thou then have had compassion also on thy fellow servant, even as I had compassion on thee?' And his lord being angry, delivered him to the torturers until he paid all the debt. So also shall My heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts"* (Matthew 18:21-35).

**“For the Son of man  
is come to seek  
and to save  
that which was lost!”**

**(Luke 19:10; Matthew 18:11).**

**I'M SORRY!**

**I'LL CHANGE!**

**I WILL DO  
PENANCE!**



### **3. EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE**

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

Though some will have gone to Confession the previous weekend, or during the week, while others may be planning to go to Confession before the Midnight Mass or the Christmas Day Mass—it is worthwhile and wholesome to spend some time pondering over our entire life’s sins before midnight and Christmas arrives. This could be done as a family, or individually. However, to avoid the exercise drifting-off into day dreaming because of insufficient preparation, it would be a good thing to furnish each person with a printed examination of conscience (catering, of course, to their age). A simple examination of conscience—one for adults and one for children—will be available for download on the website [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

Before beginning the examination of conscience, the following passages could be read aloud, in order to create the grave tone necessary for a fruitful examination of conscience. St. Peter tells us: *“Be penitent, therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out ... That everyone may convert himself from his wickedness”* (Acts 3:19, 26). Though Peter says *“convert himself”*, this conversion cannot take place without God’s help—we merely work with the grace of God to ‘convert ourselves.’

God gives us the inspiration, the movement to sorrow for sin, yet He leaves us to use that grace and *“work out our salvation in fear and trembling”* (Philippians 2:12), *“bringing forth fruits worthy of penance”* (Luke 3:8). *“For after Thou didst convert me, I did penance”* (Jeremias 31:19). This penance is so crucial, that Our Lord says: *“I say to you: but unless you shall do penance, you shall all likewise perish”* (Luke 13:3).

Before we speak of the facility of conversion, tell me who has assured you that you will live to the time you have appointed for your amendment. Do you not know how many have been deceived by this hope? St. Gregory tells us that *“God promises to receive the repentant sinner when he returns to Him, but nowhere does He promise to give him tomorrow.”*



I cannot but think that the number of souls lost in this way is infinite. It was the cause of the ruin of the rich man in the Gospel, whose terrible history is related by St. Luke:

*“The land of a certain rich man brought forth plenty of fruits; and he thought within himself, saying: What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said: This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and will build greater, and into them will I gather all things that are grown to me, and my goods; and I will say to my soul: Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thy rest, eat, drink, make good cheer. But God said to him: Thou fool, this night do they require thy soul of thee; and whose shall those things be which thou hast provided?”* (Luke 12:16-21). What greater folly than thus to dispose of the future, as if time were our own!

### **Have No Fear! Have Confidence!**

*“If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made as white as snow: and if they be red as crimson, they shall be white as wool”* (Isaias 1:18).

All God wants is repentance and sorrow for past sin. *“If the wicked do penance for all his sins which he hath committed, living he shall live and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he hath done! Is it my will that a sinner should die, saith the Lord God, and not that he should be converted from his ways, and live? Cast away from you all your transgressions, by which you have transgressed, and make to yourselves a new heart and a new spirit”* (Ezechiel 18:21-31).

### **Start Anew!**

The Sacrament of Confession casts away our transgressions and gives us a new heart and a new spirit. It is a spiritual resurrection. We enter the “tomb” of the confessional and leave our sins and guilt there, emerging as a new person, having put off the “old man” and put on the new—as St. Paul says: *“To put off...the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in spirit of your mind: and put on the new man...”* (Ephesians 4:22-23).

### **Flee the Ugliness of Sin**

Some are tempted to flee from the presence of the diseased, the crippled, the handicapped, etc., because they see a certain lack of physical perfection that they cannot cope with. Yet such diseases and handicaps are nothing compared to the soul crippled by sin. Others have the same desire to flee when faced with the worst and vilest of criminals. The lack of moral perfection repels them. Imagine what a wife or a husband becomes in the sight of their once loved spouse and children, once they have committed adultery—a filthy wretch who has betrayed trusting love and scandalized innocent children. How much more despicable is the terrible act of spiritual adultery that we commit, when we turn away from God in order to commit sin. There is no greater evil than sin and there is nothing so ugly as a soul in the state of mortal sin.

### **Flee to the Refuge of Sinners**

Shamefully place yourself at the feet of the Blessed Mother, the Refuge of sinners. Turn to her like Mary Magdalen turned to Christ. A mother can put up with the most gruesome sights and situations, when the good of her child is at stake. Mary will receive you, like a prodigal child, the moment you realize what you have done by your sins. She will console you with the thought of the new spiritual birth, for which you are now preparing. She will tell you that, as the Mother of Mercy, she has a special role to play in the conversion of sinners and in bringing about their reconciliation with God.

### **The Greatest Sinners Can and Must Become the Greatest Saints**

The greater the sinner, the greater the achievement there will be when he eventually becomes a saint—and there have been some great sinners who have become great saints: St. Mary Magdalen, the Good Thief on the cross, St. Augustine, St. John of God, St. Matthew Talbot and many, many more. What God did for them, He will also do for us—if only we let Him. You need Mary like you need mercy. For she is the Mother of Mercy.

## 4. PRAYERS AND RITUAL FOR BLESSING THE CRIB

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

“And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”  
(Luke 2:6-7).

“The star which they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And entering into the house, they found the Child with Mary His Mother, and falling down they adored Him; and opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”  
(Matthew 2:9-11).



**Leader:** Our help is in the name of the Lord.

**All:** Who hath made Heaven and Earth.

**All with Leader:** O great mystery and wonderful sign, dumb beasts saw the newborn Lord lying in a crib.

The Magnificat (divide group and alternate reading the lines)

**Group 1 :** My soul doth magnify the Lord.

**Group 2 :** And my spirit doth rejoice in God my Savior

**Group 1 :** For He hath regarded the humility of His handmaid;

**Group 2 :** for behold from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.

**Group 1 :** Because He that is mighty hath done great things to me; and holy is His name.

**Group 2 :** And His mercy is from generation unto generation, to them that fear Him.

**Group 1 :** He hath showed might in His arm:

**Group 2 :** He hath scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.

**Group 1 :** He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble.

**Group 2 :** He hath filled the hungry with good things: and the rich He hath sent empty away.

**Group 1 :** He hath received Israel His servant, being mindful of His mercy:

**Group 2 :** As He spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to His seed forever.

**Group 1 :** Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

**Group 2 :** As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.



**ALL:** O great mystery and wonderful sign, dumb beasts saw the newborn Lord lying in a crib.

**READER** (perhaps the oldest child) : The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, chapter 2, verses 15 through 20:

At that time, the shepherds said one to another: Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath showed us. And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood the word that was spoken to them concerning this child. And all that heard wondered: and at those things that were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

**ALL:** Praise be to Thee, O Christ.

**LEADER:** The Word was made flesh. Alleluia.

**ALL:** And dwelt among us. Alleluia.

**LEADER:** O Lord, hear my prayer.

**ALL:** And let my cry come unto Thee.

**LEADER:** The Lord be with you.

**ALL:** And also with you.

**LEADER:** Let us pray. Bless, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, this crib which we have prepared in honor of the new birth in the flesh of Thine only begotten Son, that all who devoutly contemplate in this image the mystery of His Incarnation may be filled with the light of His glory, who with Thee liveth and reigneth in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, world without end. Amen.

(The crib is sprinkled with holy water.)

This is the most solemn vigil of the year, except for the Paschal Vigil. Self-denial at supper is to remind us that this night Mary and Joseph sought lodging in a sheep cave, prayed, and waited. Then it happened. In the dark silent cavern in the side of the hill, the Savior of the world was born, hidden from men by God and the earth He had come to redeem.

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**"And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."  
(Luke 2:6-7).**

**"The star which they had seen in the east, went before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And seeing the star they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And entering into the house, they found the Child with Mary His Mother, and falling down they adored Him; and opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts; gold, frankincense, and myrrh."  
(Matthew 2:9-11).**





# 5. PROCLAMATION OF CHRIST'S BIRTH

from the Church's Martyrology for Christmas Eve

from devotiontoourlady.com

The LEADER reads aloud the following:

In the five-thousandth, one hundred and ninety-ninth (5199th) year from the creation of the world, when in the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth;

In the two-thousand-five-hundred-and-fifty-ninth (2959th) year from the flood;

In the two-thousand-and-fifteenth (2015th) year from the birth of Abraham;

In the one-thousand-five-hundred-and-tenth (1510th) year from the going forth of the people of Israel out of Egypt under Moses;

In the one-thousand-and-thirty-second (1032nd) year from the anointing of David as King;

In the sixty-fifth (65th) week according to the prophecy of Daniel;

In the hundred-and-ninety-fourth (194th) Olympiad;

In the seven-hundred-and-fifty-second (752nd) year from the foundation of the city of Rome;

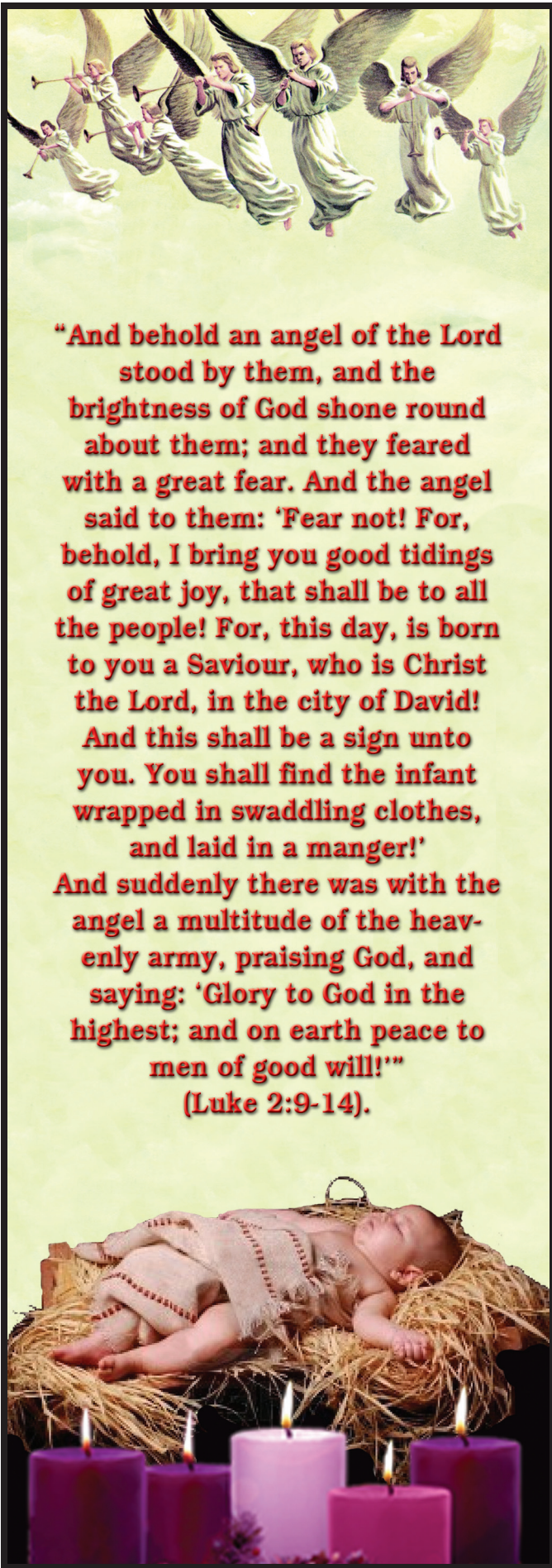
In the forty-second (42nd) year of the reign of the Emperor Octavian Augustus;

In the sixth (6th) age of the world;

While the whole Earth was at peace;

Jesus Christ, Himself Eternal God and Son of the Eternal Father, being pleased to consecrate the world by His most gracious coming, having been conceived of the Holy Ghost, and when nine months were passed after His conception, (all kneel down & remain kneeling) was born of the Virgin Mary, at Bethlehem of Juda, being made Man, Our Lord Jesus Christ was born according to the flesh.

**EVERYONE says** : We adore Thee, O Christ, and we bless Thee! For Thou hast come to redeem the world from sin! (all rise after saying the verse).





The Proclamation of Christ's birth is followed with Psalm 148, *Laudate Dominum de caelis*, the verses can be alternated between two groups.

**GROUP 1 :** Praise ye the Lord from the Heavens: praise ye Him in the high places.

**GROUP 2 :** Praise ye Him, all His angels: praise ye Him, all His hosts.

**GROUP 1 :** Praise ye Him, O sun and moon: praise Him, all ye stars and light.

**GROUP 2 :** Praise Him, ye Heavens of Heavens: and let all the waters that are above the Heavens praise the name of the Lord.

**GROUP 1 :** For He spoke, and they were made: He commanded, and they were created.

**GROUP 2 :** He hath established them forever, and for ages of ages He hath made a decree, and it shall not pass away.

**GROUP 1 :** Praise the Lord from the Earth, ye dragons, and all ye deeps:

**GROUP 2 :** Fire, hail, snow, ice, stormy winds which fulfill His word:

**GROUP 1 :** Mountains and all hills, fruitful trees and all cedars:

**GROUP 2 :** Beasts and all cattle: serpents and feathered fowls:

**GROUP 1 :** Kings of the Earth and all people: princes and all judges of the Earth:

**GROUP 2 :** Young men and maidens: let the old with the younger, praise the name of the Lord:

**GROUP 1 :** For His name alone is exalted.

**GROUP 2 :** The praise of Him is above Heaven and Earth: and He hath exalted the horn of His people.

**BOTH GROUPS TOGETHER :** A hymn to all His saints: to the children of Israel, a people approaching to Him. Alleluia.

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**"For a Child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace"**  
(Isaias 9:6)





**“I am the light of the world: he that followeth Me, walketh not in darkness, but shall have the light of life”  
(John 8:12)**



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## **6. PRAYERS & READINGS FOR THE LIGHTING THE CHRIST CANDLE**

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

THE PRAYERS ARE FOLLOWED BY THE EXPLANATION

O God, our loving Father, Thou didst send into this world of darkness, Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Light of the world and counter all the forces of evil: sin, suffering and death. Jesus called Himself the *“Light of world”* (John 9:5) and told us that we must also be the *“light of the world”* (Matthew 5:14). Grant that through Him, with Him and in Him, we may overcome evil with the force of good; destroy hatred with the power of love, and bring light to those in darkness by the power of the Faith that has been given to us.

Jesus came to cast fire on Earth and wished that it would be kindled everywhere. Enkindle in us the fire of Thy love; enlighten the darkness of our minds with the light of Thy wisdom; and help us in bringing Thy light into this world, the light that is Thy Son, born of the Virgin Mary, in Bethlehem. Let us not just love only in word alone, but by our deeds too. Help us to be zealous instruments of Thy light and love throughout this coming New Year, by showing special acts of kindness to those around us and by being Thy special instrument of reconciliation to bring sinners back to Thee, while inflaming the hearts of the lukewarm.

May the Christ Candle we light, symbolize our desire to bring light into a world of darkness and hope into a world of despair. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.



## CHRISTMAS STARTS WITH ADAM & EVE

For this purpose you could read the story of Original Sin in Genesis in the Old Testament. Reading in Genesis, we find that God the Father makes the first prophecy of the Messiah immediately after the Fall. In it He points to Bethlehem — to Christmas — because the Woman and her Seed He promises are going to be Mary and her Son.

They understand clearly what they have done: disobeyed God, wrought a debt they can never pay, brought sin and death into the world, destroyed the harmony of the universe. Worst of all, they have lost that divine life they shared so intimately with God: sanctifying grace. Jesus was born on Christmas to repay man's debt to His Father, to open the gates of Heaven, to defeat death by purchasing for us eternal life, and to institute a means by which we might share God's life again, as Adam did.

While we live here in our exile from Heaven, the object of His birth in the stable in Bethlehem is our oneness of life with Him in His Mystical Body, the Church, and through it the unbelievable intimacy of our soul's life with the indwelling Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus did Christ restore what Adam lost. Well might Adam weep, at the top of our candle. Original sin was a terrible thing.

*"And the Lord God took man, and put him into the paradise of pleasure, to dress it, and to keep it. And He commanded him, saying: 'Of every tree of paradise thou shalt eat! But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat. For in what day soever thou shalt eat of it, thou shalt die the death!' ...*

*"Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman: 'Why hath God commanded you, that you should not eat of every tree of paradise?'*

*"And the woman answered him, saying: 'Of the fruit of the trees that are in paradise we do eat: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst*

*of paradise, God hath commanded us that we should not eat; and that we should not touch it, lest perhaps we die!'*

*"And the serpent said to the woman: 'No, you shall not die the death! For God doth know that in what day soever you shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened: and you shall be as Gods, knowing good and evil!'*

*"And the woman saw that the tree was good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold: and she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave to her husband who did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened: and when they perceived themselves to be naked, they sewed together fig leaves, and made themselves aprons.*

*"And when they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in paradise at the afternoon air, Adam and his wife hid themselves from the face of the Lord God, amidst the trees of paradise. And the Lord God called Adam, and said to him: 'Where art thou?' And he said: 'I heard Thy voice in paradise; and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself!'*

*"And God said to him: 'And who hath told thee that thou wast naked, but that thou hast eaten of the tree whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat?' And Adam said: 'The woman, whom thou gavest me to be my companion, gave me of the tree, and I did eat!'*

*"And the Lord God said to the woman: 'Why hast thou done this?' And she answered: 'The serpent deceived me, and I did eat!'*

*"And the Lord God said to the serpent: 'Because thou hast done this thing, thou art cursed among all cattle, and beasts of the earth: upon thy breast shalt thou go, and earth shalt thou eat all the days of thy life. I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel (Christ)!'" (Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-15).*

## THE CHRIST CANDLE

You could use a liturgical candle (at least 51% beeswax) about two feet long which can be purchased in most religious goods shops. If not, ask the sacristan at the parish church if the parish could sell you one that is kept on hand for Mass.

You could paint designs on the candle, or simply leave it as it is. For painting the designs we use a small pointed brush of good quality, oil paints, a little turpentine for thinning, and a cloth with turpentine for wiping off mistakes (but don't be too fussy — they rarely look like mistakes to anyone but you). After the paint is dry, we shellac the designs again as protection against too much handling.

One does not have to be a fine artist to decorate a candle. Even clumsy attempts when finished are beautiful, and the effect of the whole is rich and colorful. More important than technique is love and enthusiasm. Remember that it is not just the handwork but the reading and thinking and conversations that go with it that make the completed work valuable.

If you are painting figures of the forerunners of Christ, if you can't draw them "out of your head" you will find many small figures to trace — in this instance tracing is allowed (rarely otherwise!). Keep them simple, not bothering with fingers, toes, complicated features: stress the action boldly so that they tell their story.

Paint in bold bright colors without fussing: this helps to give the final work crispness if the figures are outlined in dark brown — a sienna or umber. Simple patterns of dots, stripes, little crosses, bands of decoration add interest and contrast to the garments.

Ideas for some figures could be Adam and Eve dressed in animal skins. Noe's ark with the dove and the olive branch on top. Noe is a type of Christ. God sent the Deluge to destroy all the wicked on Earth, but preserved Noe because he was holy, and through him the human race is born again; just as through Christ, who from

the cross poured forth grace into His Church, and through His sacraments we are born again to divine life. Noe, sheltering in the ark his family, from whom would spring a new generation (Semites from his son Sem, Gentiles from the others), is a type of Christ sheltering His newborn people in the ark of the Church.

Another set of figures could be Abraham and Isaac walking hand in hand up the mountain to the place of sacrifice.

Abraham has a torch for the fire in one hand and a sword for the sacrifice in the other. Isaac has a bundle of wood on his back.

Again we see that they are types: Abraham, chosen by God to be the Father of the Jews out of whom would come the Messiah, is a type of God the Father leading His Son to sacrifice; Isaac is a type of Christ the Son, the Victim.

The wood a symbol of the cross. There is a line in this story of obedience, faith, and sacrifice which pierces to the heart. Isaac asks: *"But where is the victim?"* And Abraham replies: *"God will provide the victim."*

For Abraham He provided a ram caught in the brambles; and for us He provided His beloved Son, born in a stable, died on a cross.

Then comes Jesse in a crimson robe with a golden crown, holding an ancient musical instrument that looks like a cello. Try as we might, we can find no explanation for the cello; it simply appeared with Jesse in an old illuminated manuscript and delighted the children.

Jesse is one of Our Lord's grandfathers and is familiar to us in the genealogy of Our Lady known as the tree of Jesse; she is referred to as springing from the Root of Jesse.

There is another interesting thing about Jesse: his grandmother was Ruth, the lovely widow who returned to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Noemi, although by birth she was not a Jewess. "Thy people shall be my people; thy God my



God,” she said. We had never stopped before to think what that meant: Our Lord had, among his antecedents, a Gentile grandmother!

Next is the son of Jesse, King David. He sits holding his harp to remind us of his beautiful songs, the Psalms, and wears royal purple and a golden crown. *“Jesus, son of David” . . . “Out of the house of David” . . . “Mary and Joseph of the house of David.”*

All these point to Bethlehem, “the city of David.” Indeed the very name, Bethlehem, means “house of bread,” which lifts our minds to still another meditation on this “son of David.”

Then — Mary. She is beautiful in a blue mantle with white stars and a gold crown with stars about it. It is easy to see the point of her title “Gate of Heaven.” Through her He came, and it is through her we go to Him.

Eve weeps at the top. Mary rejoices at the bottom. Below Mary in swaddling bands, a snug white cap on His head, a gold cruciform nimbus behind him, is Jesus. And at the bottom in gold, as though it were shouting and singing and dancing, is GLORIA.

If the children are small the figures are best painted by the grownups with the little ones held firmly at bay. They do jiggle and upset things. It will also help if the candle is lodged firmly in its box and painted there.

But the planning, the talking, the awe and wonder of reading and conversation about these great things are for all the family; and as the children grow older they can help with the painting, each one doing a bit so that it is really a family affair.

What if it takes all of Advent to do it? It is a beautiful preparation for Christmas. Without once saying: *“Christmas isn’t all presents, dear; Christmas isn’t just Santa Claus,”* we begin to teach them what Christmas is.

The feast of Our Lord’s birth in the stable at Beth-

lehem is more than the most joyful and happiest event of the winter.

It celebrates the beginning of the Redemption, the story of God’s love after man’s disobedience, of God’s desire that man shall be with Him in Heaven.

It contains the seed of all the truths of the Faith, of the doctrines they must learn about the Church, the sacraments, the Mass.

It explains how we must love one another, why we must love one another, why we get presents at all on His birthday.

The greatest gift of all at Christmas is ours: the Son of God was sent to buy us back with love.

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“And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn ... And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the Infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger ... And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the Infant lying in the manger.”

(Luke 2:7; 2:12; 2:16)

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## 7. PRAYER FOR PLACING CHRIST IN HIS CRIB

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

A selected person—preferably the mother of the family, since it is Our Lady, the Mother of God, who brings Jesus into the world, though anyone else can also perform the function—places the Infant Jesus in the crib or manger, and then sprinkles the statue three times with Holy Water. Then everyone recites the following prayer:

### PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

O Divine Redeemer Jesus Christ, prostrate before Thy crib, I believe Thou art the God of infinite Majesty, even though I do see Thee here as a helpless babe.

I humbly adore and thank Thee for having so humbled Thyself for my salvation as to will to be born in a stable. I thank Thee for all Thou didst wish to suffer for me in Bethlehem, for Thy poverty and humility, for Thy nakedness, tears, cold and sufferings.

Would that I could show Thee that tenderness which Thy Virgin Mother had toward Thee, and love Thee as she did. Would that I could praise Thee with the joy of the angels, that I could kneel before Thee with the faith of St. Joseph, the simplicity of the shepherds.

Uniting myself with these first adorers at the crib, I offer Thee the homage of my heart, and I beg that Thou wouldst be born spiritually in my soul. Make me reflect in some degree the virtues of Thy admirable nativity. Fill me with that spirit of renunciation, of poverty, of humility, which prompted Thee to assume the weakness of our nature, and to be born amid destitution and suffering. Grant that from this day forward, I may in all things seek Thy greater glory, and may enjoy that peace promised to men of good will. Amen.



## AN EXPLANATION OF THE PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

In this prayer, we acknowledge that the Christ Child that we see in the manger, represented in our nativity scenes, is fully and completely God, the Creator of all. We see in this scene Christ as True God and True Man, and we recognize that the Son of God had to humble Himself to become man like us, and to live and suffer among us. We place ourselves in the scene with the angels and shepherds, with Mary and Joseph, and try to see Christ as they saw Him. In doing so, we unite ourselves more fully to Christ, and ask Him to help us conform our lives to His.

***“I believe Thou art the God of infinite Majesty, even though I do see Thee here as a helpless Babe.”*** Appearances deceive! What appears to be a mere babe, is really almighty God. The same is true of the Holy Eucharist—what appears to be mere bread, is actually almighty God, Our Lord Jesus Christ. It takes eyes of Faith to see this and it takes humility to kneel before that ‘appearance’ of bread and adore God,

***“I humbly adore and thank Thee for having so humbled Thyself for my salvation as to will to be born in a stable.”*** Our Lord would later say, *“Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart!”* Humility is the foundation of the spiritual life. It has to come first. Our Lord therefore shows His humility from the very first moment. His is not born in a palace, not even in a house, not even in the town, but outside all of those places—He is born in a cave.

***“I thank Thee for all Thou didst wish to suffer for me in Bethlehem...”*** Jesus came not to party and play, but to do penance and pray. He came not to sing and dance, but to suffer and die! He came, as He said, *“to call sinners to penance”* not to a dance!

***“I offer Thee the homage of my heart, and I beg that Thou wouldst be born spiritually in my soul.”*** Our soul is the cave, our heart is the manger, our minds should be spiritual. We

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want Him to be born into our souls—but it is not that we might make Jesus into what we are ourselves; but that Jesus might make us like unto Him. As one saint says, *“He became man that He might make like unto God!”* Or as God Himself says: *“ I am the Lord your God: be holy because I am holy”* (Leviticus 11:44).

### DEFINITION OF WORDS USED IN THE PRAYER TO JESUS IN THE MANGER

**Prostrate: face down**—usually this means “lying flat on your face on the ground”, but in this case, as you are reading a prayer, it can only be done kneeling before the manger.

**Simplicity:** in this case, the quality of the shepherds that made them close to nature.

**Adorers:** those who worship or venerate someone or something—in this case, Christ.

**Homage:** public honor or respect paid to someone important—in this case, Christ.

**Renunciation:** rejecting something either bad or good for the sake of something better.

**Destitution:** extreme poverty.



# A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Stent night, holy night,  
All is calm, all is bright  
Round yon virgin mother and child,  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Stent night, holy night,  
Shepherds quake at the sight,  
Glories stream from heaven afar,  
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia;  
Christ the Savior, is born!  
Christ the Savior, is born!

Stent night, holy night,  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

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## 8. LITURGICAL HYMNS & CAROLS

(to sing, read or recite)

from devotiontoourlady.com

### O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL (18th Century)

O come, all ye faithful,  
Joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;  
Come and behold Him  
Born, the King of angels;

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ, the Lord.

God of God,  
Light of Light,  
Lo! He abhors not the Virgin's womb;  
Very God,  
Begotten, not created;

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ, the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels,  
Sing in exultation,  
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above;  
Glory to God  
In the highest';

(Refrain)

O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ, the Lord.



Yea, Lord, we greet Thee,  
Born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to Thee be glory given;  
Word of the Father,  
Now in flesh appearing;

(Refrain)  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ, the Lord.

### **SILENT NIGHT** **[Joseph Mohr, 1818]**

Silent night! Holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright:  
Round yon virgin mother and child,  
Holy infant so tender and mild,  
Sleep in heavenly peace,  
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! Holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight:  
Glories stream from heaven a fat,  
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia.  
Christ, the Saviour is born!  
Christ, the Saviour is born!

Silent night! Holy night!  
Son of God, love's pure light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face,  
With the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

### **THE FIRST NOEL** **[The First Nowell, 1833]**

The first Noel the angels did say,  
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;  
In fields where they lay keeping their sheep  
On a cold winter's night that was so deep.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

They looked up and saw a star,  
Shining in the east, beyond them far;  
And to the earth it gave great light,  
And so it continued both day and night.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

And by the light of that same star,  
Three Wise men came from country far,  
To seek for a King was their intent,  
And to follow the star wherever it went.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

This star drew night to the north west,  
O'er Bethlehem it took its rest,  
And there it did both stop and stay  
Right over the place where Jesus lay.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

Then enter it in those Wise men three,  
Full rev'rently upon their knee,  
And offer'd there, in His presence,  
Their gold and myrrh and frankincense.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

Then let us all with one accord  
Sing praises to our heavenly Lord;  
That hath made heaven and earth of naught,  
And with his blood mankind hath bought.

(Refrain)  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel,  
Born is the King of Israel.

# OPLATKI



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## 9. PRAYERS AND RITUAL FOR THE EATING OF THE OPLATKI

(Christmas wafer bread)

from [devotiontoourlady.com](http://devotiontoourlady.com)

On Christmas Eve, the Poles have a beautiful custom that recalls the Eucharist: Oplatki (“oplatek” in the singular: note that the “l” is pronounced as a “w”, as in “opwatki”)—are very thin, crisp, large rectangular breads with the consistency of Communion wafers and impressed with religious designs—are eaten on Christmas Eve (Wigilia—meaning Vigil, from the Latin, vigilia).

This Polish custom symbolizing forgiveness and unity dates back to pre-Christian times, and is still practiced in many Polish homes throughout the world. The word “oplatek” is thought to be from the Latin *oblatum*, which gives us the English word “oblation” meaning an offering or sacrifice, which has the derivative meaning of “holy bread”—since bread is used for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

This custom is widespread throughout Eastern Europe. Among Catholic families in Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia and other Eastern European countries, the start of the traditional Wigilia (Christmas Eve Vigil) meal begins with the *Oplatki*, *Oblatky*, or *Plotkele*—which is a thin Communion-like rectangular wafer made of unleavened bread and stamped with different Christmas symbols.

Some families call it the “bread of Love” and it is widely known in English-speaking countries simply as the Christmas wafer. Some eastern German families are also known to use a wafer called *Opladen* in their Christmas cooking.



## BREAD OF LIFE

Bread is one of the most ancient and simple of all human foods. It has been a symbol of life and of hope for millennia. We recall that God sent *manna* to His people as they wandered in the Sinai desert.

Bethlehem, where the Savior was born, means “house of bread” in Hebrew. We also recall that Jesus said “*I am the bread of life,*” and that He left us His Body and Blood under the appearances of bread and wine in the Holy Eucharist. Blessed bread, associated with Mass and yet distinct from the Eucharist, has long been used as a sacramental in both the Eastern and Western Christian traditions.

In the West, the custom lives on in the pain benit (blessed bread) given in some French churches after High Mass. In the East, the use of blessed bread developed into the practice of antidoron. Some of the bread prepared for Mass (the prosphora, or offerings) is not consecrated, but is used for a kind of spiritual communion. The blessed bread is given out at the end of the Liturgy and as a gift to those who may not be able to receive the Eucharist. This practice still continues in the Byzantine Rite, but usually only on major feasts.

In the Latin Rite, the bread and wine offered at Mass are referred to as *oblata* (offerings). It is from the Latin word *Oblata* that the Polish word *Oplatki* and the Slovak word *Oblatky* is derived. The Lithuanian word *Plotkele* has the same origin, but due to something called “vocal shift” in the Lithuanian language the name has changed slightly. While the source of the name is derived from the Latin, the religious custom of Oplatki at Christmas is shared by both the Latin and the Byzantine traditions.

The Oplatki tradition developed from earlier Christian traditions, such as the antidoron, in the Kingdom of Poland not long after Christianity came to the country in 966. The custom was adopted later by the Lithuanian, Czech and Slovak peoples and has made its way into countless other households who find that its rich sym-

bolism is an easily adoptable Christmas custom which also carries profound meaning for Christians.

Poles, Slovaks, Czechs, Lithuanians and Latvians are fortunate in preserving such a meaningful custom at Christmas, as an aid to a worthy reception of Holy Communion and as a family spiritual communion on this most joyous of Christian feasts. It is customary to have the Oplatki wafers blessed by the parish priest prior to Christmas Eve and many parishes provide the Oplatki for their parishioners.

## CHRISTMAS EVE—VIGIL OF CHRIST’S BIRTH

Following time-honored tradition, many families will begin their Christmas Eve celebration by waiting for the appearance of the first star in the early evening sky as they look toward the East. This first star appearing symbolizes the Star of Bethlehem which announced that the Great Light was coming into our world, to the “*people who lived in darkness.*”

The table at which the family gathers for the Christmas Eve dinner typically has some straw strewn beneath a fine white tablecloth, to commemorate the birth of the Christ Child in the manger or cave, where the animals lived. A more modern adaptation includes the use of straw or sprigs of evergreen, which are placed on a serving platter and then covered with a fine white napkin, on which the Oplatki wafers rest.

## THE OPLATKI BREAD

This is a thin bread pressed in oblong irons in the convents, and on it in relief is the Nativity scene. Made like the host, it is a reminder of our daily bread and the Bread of Life who was born a man tonight.

You could make your own by simply mixing flour with water. Rolling out the dough to a very thin consistency and then cutting out the squares. The word “JESUS—SAVIOR” could be traced on the thin squares before baking. Or you could have a circular wafer. Some folk bake it as a circular bread-roll (like a gigantic donut) in a round tin, round like the circle of eternity and like the

everlastingness of God. Others prefer the flat-bread style.

## THE OPLATKI RITUAL

When the sun has set on Christmas Eve, and the sky begins to darken, the youngest child is sent outside to watch for the first star, just as the three Wise Men watched for the star that led them to the place of Jesus's birth. When the first star is spotted in the evening sky, the child comes in and announces that the star has appeared. Then, inside the house, like a signal that the Light of the World is about to appear, candles are lit. The Oplatki are laid at the center of the table this night, on a bed of straw. The host or head of the household (the father of the family or the oldest person, usually) begins the Oplatki ceremony:

**HOST:** May the name of God be praised!

**ALL:** For ever and ever Amen.

**HOST:** In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. On this year's shortest of days and longest of nights, a star appears shining in the darkness. For on this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** "God is born," proclaims the majestic Christmas carol. Jesus, Son of God, is born of Mary. For on this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** The star has appeared announcing His birth. The star of Bethlehem guides the Three Wise Men in their search for the new-born King. For this night, the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** This night a Child is born to us; a Son is given to us. His name is wonderful Counselor, eternal Father, Prince of peace. The Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

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**HOST:** Throughout the ages on this eve, as the first star appeared, our ancestors throughout the world celebrated with joy this Christmas Vigil as we do today. For the Word was made flesh...

**ALL:** And dwelt among us!

**HOST:** Our forefathers celebrated this evening with the breaking of the bread, the Christmas Oplątek. Following their example we share in this sacred heritage. In the breaking of this bread and sharing of this meal, Jesus is born for us this evening, around this table, under our roof, in our hearts. Let us now listen to the story of his birth as recounted by St. Luke:

A READER presents the Gospel of Midnight Mass: Luke 2:1-14

**READER:** 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.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you, who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.



**HOST:** At this feast, we share the joy of heaven. We rejoice with the Holy Family of Bethlehem. Having sighted the first star, we gather at this table to hear glad tidings of comfort and joy. Summoned to the festival, we break bread and share the holy wafer. The breaking of this bread brings with it a promise of reconciliation and peace. As we share it with each other, we are bound to forgive each other all the wrongs we have done in the past, and never return to them. Through forgiveness the Lord is born in our family, as Bethlehem, *"the house of bread,"* happens once again among us. For this reason the holy wafer is called the *"bread of love."* Glory to God in Highest Heaven! And Peace...

**ALL:** Peace to His people on earth!

### SHARING THE OPLATKI BREAD

After the Blessing of Bread, the father or an older member of the family reads the Blessing of Bread and sprinkles the bread with holy water. The father wishes all a holy Christmas and recalls those who've died during the year and brings to memory Christmas Eve suppers past.

He then breaks off a roll and passes it to the person on his right, who breaks a roll from it for himself and passes it on. Some fathers will break-off a piece to give to his wife. He places it in her mouth with a blessing such as, "May the Lord bless and keep you through this next year."

The mother reciprocates and then hands a piece to the person next to her and blesses him. That person does the same to the one next to him, and so on, until all have received and given a piece. If it is more than just the immediate family present, the oldest person present will initiate by offering an Oplatek to another, and the two break off a piece between them, passing the remainder on to the next person.

Each then shares pieces of the Oplatek wafer with everyone else present at the table. Some families, particularly of the Slovak tradition, share the Oplatek with honey on it, as a symbol of the sweetness and joy of the occasion.

The sharing-ritual is accompanied by embracing and the exchange of good wishes. The symbolism of sharing the wafer to each person, and then back and forth, symbolizes the giving and the sharing in our lives.

So loved is this tradition that Poles will mail small oplatki inside Christmas cards to those who aren't present for Christmas Eve. Many have adopted a custom from the Polish for Christmas Eve.

### CHRISTMAS EVE SUPPER

Following the sharing of Oplatki comes the Christmas Eve or Vigil supper. This annual supper is anything but another fancy dinner party, and the symbolism that has marked its introduction is carried on throughout the meal. The supper not only consists of certain types of foods but even a specific number of dishes.

Although the origins are unclear, to this day it is customary to serve an odd number of dishes. In the olden days, the number was determined by the affluence of a given household, with aristocratic families serving eleven different dishes, the nobility serving nine dishes and the peasantry serving seven.

The meal is meatless (even free of meat drippings or meat stock) and symbolizes the cleansing effect of abstinence in preparation for the coming of Christ. Among Catholics in the East, a period of fasting and abstinence is observed during Advent. The variety and abundance of what is served during the Christmas Vigil dinner makes this anything but a penitential one though.

The Christmas Eve meal, unlike the typical meal, at which a cold appetizer such as herring would be served first, traditionally begins with a simple soup. The most common is a clear beet broth with tiny mushroom-filled dumplings floating within, or a clear mushroom soup served over egg noodles. A mushroom and potato soup is also common.

Next comes the herring, usually marinated, in oil or in sour cream. This is followed by the fish dishes, the favorite being carp in various forms: fried, baked, in raisin sauce, or in aspic. Pike has traditionally come in a close second, often served in a horseradish sauce, or served cold, stuffed in its own skin and served as is or in aspic. Other common fish dishes include perch, or walleye, with a hard-boiled egg topping, tench baked in red cabbage, or crucean stewed in sour cream.

The fish, which dominate the Christmas Eve meal, have long been a symbol of Christianity. The head of the pike, when dismembered, contains bones in the shape of a cross, ladder and nails: the tools of Christ's crucifixion. Horseradish is said by some to be a reminder of life's bitterness, while honey represents its sweetness and poppyseeds symbolize tranquility.

Other dishes include sauerkraut stewed with mushrooms and/or peas, perogi with various meatless fillings—both savory or sweet, buckwheat groats and mushroom gravy, *golabki* (cabbage rolls) filled with rice or barley and mushrooms.

Rounding out the meal are such varied sweet dishes as almond soup, cranberry jelly, stewed prunes and dried fruit, noodles and poppy seed, wheat and honey pudding, rice and apple casserole plus nuts, raisins, dates and figs to snack on. Traditional cakes include poppy seed rolls, fruit cakes, and honey-spice cake. Some families serve a dessert or a drink, called compote, which is made of 12 different fruits to honor Christ's Twelve Apostles. Although drinking is rather subdued, often *krupnik* (a hot honey-spice cordial) is served.

Singing *koledy* (Christmas carols) has long been the crowning touch of the Christmas Eve Vigil celebration. The family moves to where the Christmas tree stands, lights its tapers and joyously sings the age-old hymns in honor of the Savior's birth.

## CYCLE OF LIFE

The order in which the courses of the evening meal are served signify human life and its natural cycles—honey on the Christmas wafer followed by sour potatoes or tart soup, and fish, then pastries—the sweet, the sour, and the sweet again—that is the order of our human life on earth, from joy to sorrow and back again. As Christians we live in Hope, for God's mercy to us and for the hope of ultimate Joy in Heaven which is our reward for a life well-lived. The beauty and rich symbolism of the Oplatki tradition offers us a profound, yet simple, lesson for our Christian life.

## OPLATKI DURING PERSECUTION

A story was told by a woman whose family is still in Poland. Every Christmas their family had Oplatek. When some migrated to America, those in Poland sent Oplatek to America and those in America sent Oplatek to Poland. When the Russians occupied Poland and began their persecution and espionage, the family in Poland learned to conform, withdraw, carry their religion in their hearts and write between the lines of their letters.

When it was time to send the Oplatek, they determined to find a way. That year the family in America received a conventional card on which was pasted a red paper-like disk with a conventional greeting. The censor never suspected that it was Oplatek, properly blessed, cut in a circle like a host, painted red for Divine Love, not for Communism, and sent as a salute from one part of the Mystical Body to another half a world away. They were reminding each other that they share the same Body, eat the same Flesh.

It is the end of Advent. So much of it we have understood better by signs and symbols. The first Gospel warned us to watch the signs and prepare. Our Lord spoke of His Second Coming, saying there would be signs in the sun and the moon and the stars. Now we are again on the threshold of the feast of His First Coming. Holy Church is so good. She has us prepare every year, prepare and prepare and prepare. She will keep us ready.



# ALL-NIGHT PRAYER VIGIL AT THE MANGER OF OUR LORD



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## 10. OVERNIGHT VIGIL AND PRAYERS

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This is what separates the men from the boys, the women from the girls, the fervent from the not so fervent.

The opening minutes of Christmas could and should be given to Our Lord. Much like Abel giving God the first fruits of his flock of sheep.

Christmas is a time of sheep and shepherds. The shepherds were the first watchers at the cave, aside from Mary and Joseph. Let us also flock to the baby Good Shepherd and not leave Him alone throughout the night. Of course, it is a sacrifice—who doesn't like to sleep!?! Yet Our Lord has come to sacrifice—to sacrifice Himself for His sheep!

A large family could handle this far more easily than a small family. One does not have to guarantee a presence at the home nativity scene for every single minute, all night long. However, perhaps a few minutes of each hour could be covered between all the family members. Simply praying a decade of Rosary would be enough to cover your 'shift'! Some family members or guests could do more, other less. Age and health will play a great part in it.

Alarm clocks (cell phone alarms too) can be set to wake the person up, or if a family intends to really sacrifice, and do the “whole hog” by maintaining an all night vigil of prayer, then as one goes to bed, they can wake the next person on list.

We cannot outdo God in generosity. After all, it's His birthday! Many a mother spends a whole night watching over a sick child! The world is sick and Our Lord is sick of the world! *“Watch and Pray! The spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.”*

# SIGN-UP SHEET FOR ALL-NIGHT PRAYER VIGIL

12:00 to 12:15	12:15 to 12:30 am	12:30 to 12:45 am	12:45 to 1:00 am
1:00 am to 1:15 am	1:15 am to 1:30 am	1:30 am to 1:45 am	1:45 am to 2:00 am
2:00 am to 2:15 am	2:15 am to 2:30 am	2:30 am to 2:45 am	2:45 am to 3:00 am
3:00 am to 3:15 am	3:15 am to 3:30 am	3:30 am to 3:45 am	3:45 am to 4:00 am
4:00 am to 4:15 am	4:15 am to 4:30 am	4:30 am to 4:45 am	4:45 am to 5:00 am
5:00 am to 5:15 am	5:15 am to 5:30 am	5:30 am to 5:45 am	5:45 am to 6:00 am
6:00 am to 6:15 am	6:15 am to 6:30 am	6:30 am to 6:45 am	6:45 am to 7:00 am
7:00 am to 7:15 am	7:15 am to 7:30 am	7:30 am to 7:45 am	7:45 am to 8:00 am
8:00 am to 8:15 am	8:15 am to 8:30 am	8:30 am to 8:45 am	8:45 am to 9:00 am
9:00 am to 9:15 am	9:15 am to 9:30 am	9:30 am to 9:45 am	9:45 am to 10:00 am