

# GOD WITH US

A Prayer Guide for the Season of Christmas  
in a Time of Pandemic



2020

## What is Christmas?

Christmas has become one of the most important feasts in the Christian calendar. The New Testament gives no date or year for the birth of Jesus. In fact, for the first three centuries there is very little evidence of Christians celebrating the nativity of Jesus. The first Christmas celebrations seem to begin around the beginning of the fourth century. In an effort to Christianise the Roman winter festival of light, Christians began to celebrate the anniversary of the birth of Jesus, whom the author of the Gospel of John describes as “a light that shines in the dark...” (Jn: 1:4) on the 25th of December. The English word, ‘Christmas’, first appears around the tenth century as *Cristes-messe*, or literally ‘Christ’s Mass’ celebrated on the day of his birth.

## A Spiritual Opportunity

The contemporary celebration of Christmas is a mix of religious and cultural traditions and customs. While modern times have seen the feast take on commercial and secular tones, at its heart, it still remains for many the celebration of the Birth of Jesus Christ. Retelling the story of the first Christmas has the innate power to inspire moments of spiritual reflection and renewal along with the practice of charity and outreach to those who are in need. It has become an important time to gather as a family and indeed to gather as a Christian community. This year, the restrictions in place because of the Coronavirus mean that we may not be in a position to gather as usual for our religious services. This situation challenges us to find new ways of reflecting on our faith and praying in our homes. It is hoped that this guide will assist you in doing just that.

## Christmas Traditions

Christmas is a season rich in traditions from the lighting of lights to the decoration of trees - from the giving of gifts to the magic of Santa, from gathering for midnight Mass to the customary meals together. The singing of carols and the construction of the nativity scene or crib, all help to make the season special and to bring the birth of Jesus to life in our day.

## For Younger Family Members

At various points throughout this guide there are places for the younger members of a household to get involved. Art materials – paper, pens, and paints would be helpful at these times. So too would a guiding hand from an adult.

## Broadcast Masses



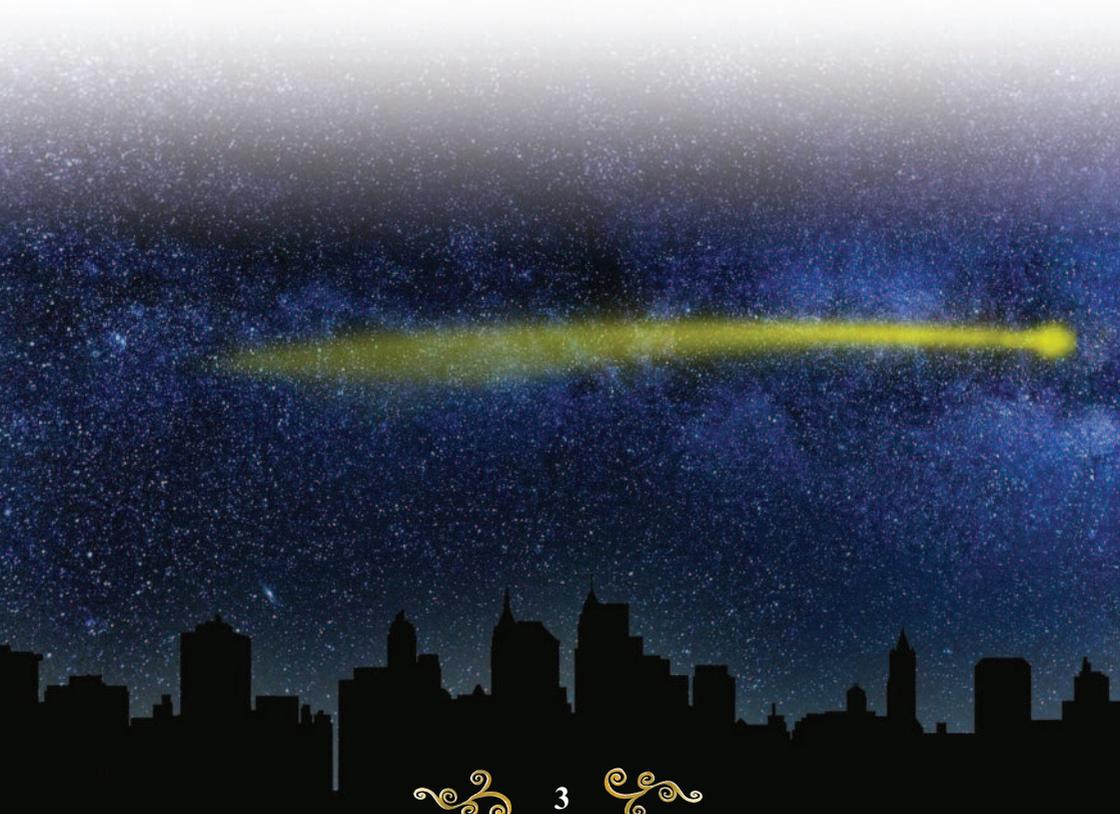
While nothing can substitute for gathering in person, we are blessed to live in an age where the celebration of the Eucharist can be broadcast on radio or television or by means of the internet. This guide is also designed to help deepen your participation in those broadcasts and to assist you in getting the most out of them spiritually.

## Call to Action

Followers of Jesus are called to be people of action. During each of our days of prayer there will be a call to action. To do something different or significant that puts the message of that particular day into practice.

## Safety

This guide is designed for use by a single household. All health and safety advice should be adhered to. When using candles, please do so safely.



# A Time of Reconciliation with God and with One Another

21st December 2020

(or on any day before Christmas)



Christmas can be a time for new beginnings. As this year's celebrations approach let us open our lives to God's healing and transforming presence and let us be reconciled with God and with one another. One of the ways of bringing this reconciliation about is by celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession). Check out the times of a Service of Reconciliation or Confession at a church near you. Plan a time to attend, perhaps with your family. Celebrating this short service beforehand may help you to prepare.

This service may also be of help to those who are vulnerable and who, this year, cannot go out to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) or those who may be joining an online reconciliation service. In such cases Pope Francis gives the following advice: "If you cannot find a priest to confess to, speak directly with God, your Father, and tell him the truth. Say, 'Lord, I did this, this, this. Forgive me,' and ask for pardon with all your heart". Make an act of contrition, the Pope said, and promise God, 'I will go to confession afterward, but forgive me now. And immediately you will return to a state of grace with God.' (*Pope Francis, 2020*)

Gather alone or with your household before your advent wreath or crib. Light the candles on the wreath or a candle near the crib. Focus on the empty manger – it stands ready to receive Jesus. Bring before the scene your own life – how open and how ready are you to welcome the presence of God into your heart and your home this Christmas? How willing are you to allow God’s presence to shape and mould your life in love towards others?

This ritual should be celebrated quietly and slowly giving time to reflect on one’s life and to open your heart to receive the forgiving and healing love of God.

## As we begin ...

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

## Let us listen to God’s Word ...

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was going through the town and suddenly a man whose name was Zacchaeus made his appearance; he was one of the senior tax collectors and a wealthy man. He kept trying to see where Jesus was, but he was too short and could not see him for the crowd; so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus who was to pass that way. When Jesus reached the spot he looked up and spoke to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today.' And he hurried down and welcomed him joyfully. They all complained when they saw what was happening. 'He has gone to stay at a sinner's house,' they said. But Zacchaeus stood his ground and said to the Lord, 'Look, sir, I am going to give half my property to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody, I will pay him back four times the amount.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man too is a son of Abraham; for the Son of man has come to seek out and save what was lost.'

## Let us reflect ...

“Zacchaeus welcomed him gladly” ... How lovely it is to receive an invitation from a friend or family member to visit and perhaps to share a meal with them. The current Covid-19 restrictions and the necessity of “being apart” has heightened our consciousness of how enriching it is to reach out and spend time in the company of other people. We are told that Zacchaeus was a rather greedy man. Greed causes us to focus on ourselves and to exclude others from our lives. In the process we are both impoverished and diminished as human beings.

Jesus senses Zacchaeus’ greed-induced isolation and the hurt and harm it was causing him. He wants to break through the barriers Zacchaeus’ greed had erected.

Instead of waiting for Zacchaeus to invite him to visit, Jesus reaches out and boldly invites him himself. In a certain sense we expect Zacchaeus – true to form – to refuse. However, he does not. The Gospel states that Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly and as the saying goes, the rest is history. That outreach from Jesus and that acceptance from Zacchaeus meant the walls of greed and isolation came tumbling down. Zacchaeus began to change. To be less self-obsessed and more other orientated. It was this change that was to make all the difference to the quality of his life.

At Christmas time – God says to each of us “come down. Hurry, because I am to stay at your house today.” If we “welcome him gladly” it can begin a process of profound renewal in our lives. In time, it can make all the difference! (*Aileen Cawley, 2020*)

Pause for a few moments of silent reflection

## Children’s Activity

During the reflection time children in the house might be invited to draw a picture of Jesus speaking with Zacchaeus – include speech bubbles to bring that conversation to life.

## Examination of Conscience

Let us pause, deep down in the silence of our heart, to examine our conscience.

(pause – and take your time)

How have I failed to love God, failed to do what is right, failed to love others?

## Confession of Sin

Using your own words, in the silence of your heart, speak directly to God about your sins.

(Pause – and take your time)

‘Lord, I did this ..., this ..., this ... Forgive me!’ and ask for pardon with all your heart.

## Act of Contrition

Then say: O my God, I thank you for loving me, I am sorry for all my sins, help me to live like Jesus and not to sin again. **Amen**

## Commitment to Celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Dear Lord, I firmly resolve, once I can, to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but good Lord forgive me now. **Amen**

### Prayer of St Francis (pause)

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love  
Where there is injury, pardon  
Where there is doubt, faith  
Where there is despair, hope  
Where there is darkness, light  
And where there is sadness, joy. **Amen**

### Blessing

The Lord bless us and keep us; The Lord make his face shine upon us and be gracious to us; The Lord turn his face toward us and give us his peace both now and forever. **Amen**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen**

### Call to Action

Be reconciled with someone. Volunteer to help out in your local parish over the Christmas period. Make a donation to St Vincent de Paul or Trócaire. Help someone in need.





Prepared by the Dioceses of Clonfert and Elphin  
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