

# Growing in FAITH

Discovering hope and joy in the Catholic faith.

December 2006

## One Minute Meditations

### Shepherds of the poor

Among the first to receive Jesus into the world were some shepherds. Today, the presence of the shepherds in the Nativity scene reminds us of the poor of the world and how close they are to Jesus' heart. In honor of the shepherds, perform some act of kindness to the poor in your community for Christmas.

### Say "no" for Advent

Instead of taking on extra activities during the Christmas season, try saying "no" more often. Don't work overtime, don't attend another party, even say "no" to additional volunteer activities. Use the time you said "no" to the world to say "yes" to preparing for the Lord.

### Pray the wait

Pray randomly this Advent while you wait. Pray while waiting for your table at a restaurant, while your toast is cooking, at the stop light, on the way to work. Keep your prayer simple and start with praise.

Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church  
(410) 686-4972

## Christmas celebrates unimaginable love

Christmas time can feel like a test of character. In the midst of the seasonal stress, we are asked to reach into ourselves and bring out only what is kind, generous, and loving. It may help to remember that an unimaginable love is the reason for the season.

**God loves us and takes delight in us.** He rejoices in our creation and loves us for exactly who we are. This Christmas, try to see yourself through God's eyes. Not the flawed human visible to the rest of us, but the product of God's divine love and the reflection of his glory.

**"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"** (John 1:14). At Christmas, we celebrate the moment when God became one of us and shared our experience in the world. This time of year we are meant to reach out beyond our friends and family and share our experience of God with the rest of the world.

The real gift of the Magi was to receive Jesus as the savior of all people. Your gift to Jesus this year can be an open heart, ready to receive the love he has for you. **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life John"** (3:16).



## Why do we make "Jesse trees" during Advent?

The Jesse tree helps us to remember Jesus' ancestors as we prepare for his birth. The prophet Isaiah said, **"a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse ... the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him"** (Isaiah 11:1-2). Isaiah said that the Holy One will come from Jesse's family.

The ornaments that hang on the Jesse tree represent Jesus' ancestors: Adam and Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Noah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Ruth, Jesse, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Micah, Jonah, Joseph, and Mary.

## *Hoping for a stress-free holiday?*

Crowded malls. Money worries. Noise, confusion, fighting relatives. How can you rise above them for a more joyful holiday?

**Plan ahead.** Try to anticipate and avert the usual holiday problems. Sit feuding relatives at opposite ends of the Christmas dinner table. Plan how to handle guests who smoke.

**Stay within your budget.** Overspending creates stress later.

**Keep a few extra gifts on hand.** Afraid of getting a gift without having one to give in return? Wrap and set aside a few extra batches of Christmas cookies just in case.

**Make time for personal prayer.** Throughout the season, make time for peaceful meditation and prayer – even if it's only a few minutes a day. Not only will it help defuse the tension, you'll be less frazzled when Christmas arrives.

**When in doubt, sing.** If you find your patience and good cheer running out, sing your favorite Christmas carol – the louder, the better. A little silliness might be the best antidote to holiday stress.

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## **Q&A Was St. Nicholas a real person?**

St. Nicholas, the bishop of Myra, was born at the end of the third century in Asia Minor. The son of wealthy parents who died while he was a child, he selflessly shared his wealth with those in need.

One popular story involving St. Nicholas concerns a man who had lost his fortune and was too poor to fill his family's bellies. He was considering selling his three daughters into slavery to pay off his debts. Nicholas heard of the man's situation and secretly threw a bag of gold into an open window in the house. When the man awoke the next morning, he thanked God for his good fortune. Twice more Nicholas helped the man in this way, and each time the man praised God – just as Nicholas intended.

St. Nicholas' feast day is December 6th. Children all over the world put their shoes out at night to find them filled with candy and small treats in the morning in remembrance of St. Nicholas' anonymous generosity.

## *from Scripture: Luke 2:41-52, Families aren't always holy.*

Perhaps there is no time during the year when our families can be at their worst than at Christmas time. The holiday brings together families and their baggage in ways that don't always bring out the best in us. Perhaps it helps to remember that the Holy Family was a real family just like ours. They had tough times, too. There was talk of divorce when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant. Then they had trouble finding a place for Mary to give birth. Immediately afterwards, the family fled to a strange land because a madman wanted Jesus killed. Twelve years later, he and his parents were separated for three days when he stayed behind at the temple. Families have good times and bad, and it takes every member working together to make a healthy family. Try to suspend judgment of your family this year, and love them as a Holy Family, even if not everyone is loveable all the time.

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## **Feasts & Celebrations**

December is the month in which we anticipate the coming of Christ and begin the celebration of his birth. It has become a time to reaffirm our respect for life from conception to natural death.

**Dec. 8 – Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.** This is the day we celebrate that Mary was conceived in St. Anne's womb without original sin.

**December 7th – St. Ambrose (397).** As bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose was an effective pastor and teacher, and was devoted to care of the poor. He vigorously guarded the Church against Arians, who denied Jesus' divinity.

**December 26 – St. Stephen (first century).** A deacon of the early Church, St. Stephen preached that God can be found everywhere, not just in one place like the temple. He angered the Jewish authorities by pointing out that the Israelites consistently rejected God's messengers and chosen servants. For that he was stoned to death and became the first martyr.