

Celebrating holidays

Question: When I entered the Church a few years ago, I was disappointed in the rather dour look of my parish during the holidays: no flowers, lights or cheerful music. Instead there are dark themes of judgment, purple everywhere and none of the holiday songs. Can you explain the resistance of the Church to decorate?

– **Mary Francis**, via email

Answer: This is a good example of the strong, sometimes overwhelming effects of popular culture. Regarding Advent, the Church has not changed her focus, the world has. Advent and Christmas are our seasons and feasts that the world has taken up for purposes of its own. Even the word “holiday” is a mispronunciation of the words “holy day.”

In the Church, Advent is a season focused on preparing ourselves for the coming of the Lord. In a way, we step back to the Old Testament period, which was a long time of preparing God’s people for the coming of the Messiah. Thus, in the Church we recall our need for a messiah and savior, so that when he comes liturgically at Christmas we can rejoice more fully in his loving arrival. But we do not simply acknowledge past events. We also acknowledge that the Messiah, Jesus, has already come and that he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. He warned us on numerous occasions that we must be ready for that day or hour of which no one knows. And for that we must be ready. Advent has always focused on this.

The world rushes to the feast without really acknowledging the purpose or meaning of it. As such, we get lost in decorations and material gifts, and we omit reflecting on what the meaning of these traditions actually is. What really drives it is marketing. Christmas has long been an important feast in the

Church, lasting about 12 days at the end of December and early January. But the notion that it is a month and a half feast from November through January is really less than 100 years old. The Church's traditions are far more ancient and will likely be here well after the current Western and American traditions have run their course.

Your enjoyment of the holiday season is understandable. But it is also true that others have come to find the lengthy holiday period wearisome with its many demands to buy gifts, decorate and attend numerous functions. Somewhere a balance can be struck in our lives that acknowledges the joy and beauty of the holidays, but that also explores the reason for the joy that we have a savior and messiah. This is the hoped-for outcome of the Church's approach to Advent.

Decorating during Advent

Question: Are Catholics allowed to decorate their homes before Dec. 24?

Name withheld

Answer: Yes. The Church has no binding teachings or norms on what your home should look like in December. The norms to avoid decorating apply to church buildings in the season of Advent. Some Catholics like to celebrate at home more in unity with the liturgy and thus wait until later in December to decorate their homes. But there may be practical or preferential reasons to decorate earlier.

All this said, Advent is a beautiful season, too, and Catholics are encouraged to celebrate the month of December with a spirit of watchful readiness through prayer, confession and scriptural reflection. Hence, more important than home decoration is spiritual preparation for the Lord who will surely come.

Msgr. Charles Pope is the pastor of Holy Comforter-St. Cyprian

in Washington, D.C., and writes for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., blog at blog.adw.org. Send questions to msgrpope@osv.com.