

Using Christmas Carols to Evangelize

Many of us experience difficulty concentrating on a prayerful and penitential Advent, especially in a society flooded with yuletide decorations, Christmas cookies, and flavored candy canes well before Thanksgiving. But both realities may be addressed and reconciled if we recall the roots of Advent and prepare ourselves to share its meaning with the world around us. "Advent's intention is to awaken the most profound and basic emotional memory within us, namely, the memory of the God who became a child. This is a healing memory; it brings hope." [Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) *Seek That Which is Above*, Ignatius Press, 2007]

This memory is already being awakened by the Holy Spirit as millions of people search the Internet during December for the words and music of long forgotten religious Christmas carols. Christmas music surrounds us in stores, malls, and in the media. What if individuals, families, small groups, ministries, and parishes were to build upon this as a God-given evangelistic opportunity to invite acquaintances, friends, and relatives to experience Jesus-centered carols during the pre-Christmas season?

At the heart of the most enduring Christmas Carols and their imagery is the core belief that "Jesus Christ is Lord." (Phil. 2: 11) This expression is a shorthand version of the Christian creed and is at the heart of our Baptismal Vows. These four small words can guide us in using carols to share Christ. The name "Jesus" comes from the Hebrew, "Yeshua," and means "God saves". Carols that help us see Jesus include *What Child is this?* and *Silent Night*. Carols about Christ, the anointed one, include *Angels We Have Heard on High* and *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*. Finally, the experience of choosing Jesus as Lord is described in *O, Come All Ye Faithful* and *Joy to the World*. When we sing any of these Jesus-centered carols we have an opportunity "to put on Jesus Christ." (Gal. 3:7) and then share Christ with others through these songs.

We encourage you and your faith communities to invite inactive and unchurched friends and family to gather outside of liturgical space and let these Christmas carols echo God's voice as you sing them together. Here are some suggestions for enhancing God's call to surrender to Christ in new ways. Let's begin with some simple exercises we can use to prepare ourselves; then move on to what could happen when we gather.

Individual and Small Group Activity (35—45 minutes)

Christmas Carols Prayers and Imagery

Get copies of Christ-centered Christian carols. (Carol handouts can be downloaded at <http://www.christmascarolfestival.com/SongsheetsHandouts.html>) Read aloud one carol at a time and reflect on its images for Jesus in silence. Prayerfully repeat a favorite image aloud. Then as a group, repeat, "And so we pray, Jesus Christ is Lord". Move on to another carol, as time permits. Here are samples of Christ-centered carols and some of their imagery.

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| • <i>Angels We Have Heard on High</i> | Christ, Lord, Newborn King, Glad Tidings |
| • <i>Hark! The Herald Angels Sing</i> | Newborn King, Christ, Everlasting Lord, Emmanuel... |
| • <i>It Came Upon the Midnight Clear</i> | Gracious King, Good news |
| • <i>Joy to the World</i> | King, Savior, Ruler, Source of joy |
| • <i>Come All Ye Faithful</i> | Christ, Lord, Word of the Father, Word made flesh |
| • <i>Come, O Come, Emmanuel</i> | Emmanuel, Son of God, Dayspring, Key of David |
| • <i>Little Town of Bethlehem</i> | Light, Born of Mary, Emmanuel |

- *Silent Night*
- *What Child is This*

Holy Infant, Christ, Savior, Son of God, Light, Redeemer
Christ, Lord, King of Kings, Son of Mary, Word

Preparing for Christmas Carol Witnessing

1. Write down a line from a carol that includes a striking Jesus image. You might also choose a line from the Christmas event that the carol refers to (See Lk.1&2; Mt.1&2; Jn.1).
2. In one or two sentences, describe what God might be saying to you through this Christmas carol.
3. What about this image might be difficult for a marginal, inactive, or unchurched Catholic to understand? How would an awareness of this difficulty change what you share about this carol?
4. Your experiences and insights can help connect others to the Christmas event, its imagery and to Jesus. Rewrite your description, if necessary, and condense it down to one sentence for sharing.
5. Which of these categories does your sharing fall into? Is it about —
 - A conversion that took place in you
 - God's invitation to deeper faith
 - God's call to enter into the community of the parish.

Consider preparing a longer sharing for more serious conversations that includes how you were moved from fear to courage, or from hatred to love, weakness to strength, despair to hope, sickness to health, guilt to peace, bondage to freedom, loneliness to community, being lost to being found. But remember most pre-Christmas sharing would normally be of the one sentence variety.

6. Practice sharing what you have written with a partner or small group (three or four people). Finish by sharing how your belief in Jesus has been affected by sharing Christmas carols.

Take an Evangelization Challenge

‘Homemade’ Christmas Carol Festival (45 to 60 mins.)

Invite your neighbors and family together during Advent to sing your way back to Bethlehem. Before you sing a particular carol (but not all of them), share a Jesus image and how it strikes you, IN ONE SENTENCE. (Invite everyone to bring their favorite Christmas treats to share afterward.)

Consider using a nativity set as a centerpiece for your gathering or as an aid for prayer during Advent. Imagine traveling back to visit Bethlehem on Christmas morning. Here are video resources that might be helpful for the journey: *Hello Mary (Hail Mary)* at <http://www.mycatholicvoice.com/media/T4pI9T> or *Come Let us Adore Him* at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe72dOjCLc> or *Christmas Carol Festival* at <http://www.mycatholicvoice.com/media/h0En9h>

Prayer before a Manger

Jesus, I am as empty as this manger. I place all the dark and lonely corners of my soul into your hands. I give you all the things that keep me from finding you. Help me wait for your presence. Help me surrender all of my emptiness to you, as I watch for the Christmas star. Be born in my heart once again. Amen. (by *Therese Boucher*)