

Making Spiritual Preparations for the Lord's Advent

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“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me” (Malachi 3:1).

What a busy time Christmas has become! Weeks, and for some, even months, are spent in preparing, selecting or making and sending out Christmas cards; deciding upon suitable gifts for loved ones, and wrapping them; decorating and making cookies.... The list could go on and on. As we all know, there is much more to Christmas than these natural preparations; there are interior things, too. And yet, if we are going to enter into these interior things, we must also prepare for them. Without the external preparations there could be no celebration, no church services, no tableaux, no festive dinners, no gifts. Likewise, without preparation to accept them, there can be no reception of the interior things of Christmas from the Lord. What is more, the interior celebration of the Lord's birth gives meaning and life to the external festivities, and so these can also suffer if we do not prepare interiorly for the Lord's birth.

We often feel that Christmas is a time for children. Certainly, it should be a special time for them. Children can be excited, not only because of gifts and goodies, but also because of the story about the Lord's birth. A spirit of natural charity, joy and peace can affect children, especially if we prepare them to be affected by these things. However, only an adult can be in an internal acknowledgement of the Lord, an understanding of the need for His advent, and, from this, a spirit of joy and celebration because of His birth. In order for us to come into these spiritual things there must be preparation.

John the Baptist was sent to prepare people to receive the Lord's teachings. The theme of his preaching was repentance. “Brood of vipers!” John cried to the multitudes. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:7-8).

Just as the whole world had to be prepared to receive the Lord, through the preaching of John, so also we must be prepared, and the essence of our preparation must also be repentance. Our hearts have not room for the Lord until we examine the things we love in the light of the Word, see the evils there as evils, and repent of them. Such preparation should not be limited to the Christmas holiday. The Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church tells us that “Those who lead the life of faith repent daily. They pay attention to the evils present with them, acknowledge them, are on their guard against them, and implore the Lord for help” (*Arcana Coelestia* 8391).

Still, if Christmas is to be more than an empty tradition for us, we must also prepare specifically for it—prepare our understanding with knowledge of why the Lord had to be born into our world and also prepare our will or heart with repentance. We need to acknowledge the effect of the Lord's advent upon us personally and acknowledge our need for Him to be born in us.

Sometimes, we can get so caught up in external preparations for Christmas that we pay little more than lip service to the “true meaning” of the celebration. When this happens we are seeking the joy and happiness of Christmas in those external things. Is it any wonder that we feel let down or disappointed a day or two after Christmas? Even when everything goes the way we planned, the external things still bring only an empty form of happiness.

The external things do have their place. Festive family meals, singing hymns, exchanging gifts, church services and other externals of Christmas are useful. Even as adults, who are capable of receiving the internals of Christmas, we still need suitable natural activities as a basis for our interior appreciation of the Lord's birth. How much more do children, who cannot yet understand interior spiritual things, need suitable externals so that a basis can be laid for the reception of those internal things in later years.

At times we may wonder about the appropriateness of certain traditions of Christmas, such as gifts, Santa Claus, and Christmas trees. Certainly, it is important for us to develop distinctively New Church forms of Christmas traditions to more fully express a genuine internal. Likewise, we should avoid externals that seem opposed to genuine internals. Still, there is much in a "traditional Christmas" that can be of good use in providing a basis for our spiritual celebration and in making Christmas a special and meaningful time. The most important thing is whether we, as parents, are at the same time in a sphere of internal worship to the Lord and are emphasizing those things that are truly meaningful to our children.

When I was a child, we had Christmas presents, Christmas trees, and even Santa Claus. I don't remember that I ever really believed that he was a real person, because my parents didn't emphasize it, but he was still the source of some very real and very innocent anticipation. Some of my fondest childhood memories revolve around the family tradition of looking for the Christmas tree, which we all did together. We decorated it together and found great joy in the beauty and special quality that it brought to our tired old living room. The things that are important to me, though, aren't the tree or the decorations, but the family's cooperation, mutual love and happiness, that found some measure of expression in the beauty of the tree.

Giving gifts became very important to me, more important than those that I received. Because our family was large, it was essential that those children who could earn their own money buy gifts for the younger ones, as well as for Mom and Dad. I will never forget the excitement of shopping on my own, picking out something suitable for each member of the family, wrapping and finally giving it. That was a natural activity which, as I grew older, served as a basis for many of the truly spiritual things of Christmas. These externals were part of our preparation for Christmas as children, and they did help us to feel innocent joy in the Lord's birth.

I remember many other things, such as our parents' insistence that on Christmas morning we go to church before we open our presents, because celebrating the Lord's birth was the most important thing. In some way, each part of our traditional Christmas expressed to us children those interior things that made Christmas significant to our parents.

Children cannot make spiritual preparations for Christmas. They cannot repent; they cannot even fully understand why the Lord came into the world. For this reason children, especially, need suitable natural activities to excite happiness and the love of one another. As they grow older, those external traditions must be infilled with spiritual things; otherwise their celebrations will be empty of any real joy. Then they might begin looking for the happiness of Christmas in strict adherence to the traditions of their childhood, or vicariously through the happiness of their own children. But if we, as parents, prepare ourselves to enter into the internal things of Christmas, and emphasize to our children those things in our external traditions that are truly meaningful, then we will also be preparing them to enter into those spiritual things as they, too, become adults.