

Prepare to place baby Jesus in the manger

When I was little, I thought Advent was all about “waiting” – just waiting for Christmas Eve and Christmas to come, so we could put the baby Jesus in the manger of the Nativity set. It seemed to be reinforced by some of the Scriptures that talked about watching and waiting, like the story of the virgins waiting for the bridegroom who ran out of oil for their lamps.

Of course, as I grew older and wiser, I realized the point of that parable is that one must be prepared for the coming of the guest of honor. And in Isaiah, we’re told, “A voice cries out: In the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!”

Advent is not just about waiting passively, but about preparing actively and preparing with hope in our heart. We make a lot of preparations for Christmas. All too often, those preparations have to do with shopping and decorations.

Everywhere, sales beckon us. This year, stores and online merchants have become even bolder in their holiday pitches, as businesses and government leaders encourage Americans to stimulate the economy by spending, spending, spending!

Certainly, decorating the house – inside and out – helps get us in the spirit of the season. And if buying presents and making cookies and other gifts helps us recall that the Father gave us the most precious gift of his Son, then gift-giving is fine, too.

But we need to do more. We need to find time to pray, to light an advent wreath, to attend a parish reconciliation (penance) service. Although it is hard to find time as the season gets busier, we need to set priorities well and make time for the important things.

While we are encouraged to buy more to help the economy recover, we also must remember that many people are in need. Due to layoffs, closures and fewer hours, families that never before needed help are seeking aid from local agencies and charities.

Many nonprofits – such as Catholic Charities, pro-life pregnancy centers and the St. Vincent de Paul Society – count on donations at the end of the tax year to make their budgets. With fewer corporate donors and more folks seeking assistance, they need the help of individual donors now, perhaps more than most years. Look in your heart and see whether some of your holiday budget can be sent to any of the helping agencies that serve our area.

The angels brought “tidings of great joy” and invoked “on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Lk 2:10, 14), but in our city and state, violence still shatters neighborhoods. The gun turn-in program sponsored by The Catholic Review in cooperation with two local parishes Dec. 5 hopes to make a dent in that by removing some weapons from the streets, and bring some peace to our community.

There are other ways to prepare your home and heart for the coming of the Savior:

Acknowledge the great gift of life we have in Jesus, by sharing life with others via a blood donation. Blood banks always need donations at this time of year, especially as more people take to the road to visit friends and relatives. This holiday season will again be one in which too many people drink and drive, or drive distracted, and in which too many people are injured in the resulting accidents. Make time for a clean heart by receiving the sacrament of reconciliation (penance); most parishes will offer a reconciliation service during Advent in addition to regular times the sacrament is available.

Don’t just wait for Christmas. Use this time of Advent to prepare. Then, when Dec. 25 comes, you will be ready to place the Christ child into your manger.

Gunty is associate publisher/editor of The Catholic Review.