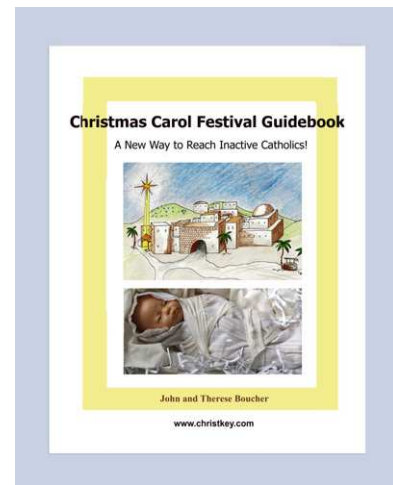


Christmas Carol Festival Guidebook:

A New Way to Reach Inactive Catholics!

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Frequently Asked Questions

Question 1: Why would we promote Christmas carols before Christmas? Isn't this undermining the season of Advent and its emphasis on waiting?

Advent is the time when Christmas carols are present in the culture. We can most effectively turn a spotlight on these centuries-old treasures at this time. We believe that God speaks through these songs and that we can affirm and nurture the seeds of faith during this holy season. It is only the active believer who understands the meaning of self-denial and waiting as a kind of spiritual preparation. Our goal is to help inactive Catholics and unchurched prepare for Christmas by experiencing the meaning of these prayerful hymns in a personal way. When this happens, marginalized believers enter into joyful and hopeful preparations for celebrating the Incarnation of Jesus at Masses on Christmas Day.

Question 2: What is the role of the choir or parish music ministry during a Christmas Carol Festival event?

Our aim during a *Christmas Carol Festival* event is to help people encounter God through SINGING Christmas carols about the Good News of the birth of Jesus. We provide the opportunity to experience God's healing and reassuring presence as we sing carols. Music can also convert and renew us as we offer a simple "Yes" to the message contained in the lyrics. If there are choir members or music ministers who are comfortable with this evangelizing focus, they are welcome. Their expertise in leading congregational prayer through music would be a valuable addition. That being said, everyone involved should lay aside the goal of offering a concert, as inspiring as that may be. We are encouraging the discovery and rediscovery of God's message through singing. In any case, you should be in contact with music ministries and choirs about what you are doing. It might also be helpful to request a list of traditional Jesus-centered carols that will be used on Christmas, so that these same carols could be offered during the *Christmas Carol Festival*. The primary **goal of evangelizing applies to all other parish ministries.**

Question 3: I thought we weren't supposed to sing Christmas Carols during advent?

It is common pastoral practice to use explicit Christmas songs during liturgy only from Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve to the Feast of the Epiphany, although the period of Advent marked by the “O Antiphons”, beginning on December 17th may be a time when Christmas carols could be sung. In any case, it is our understanding that these pastoral practices do not apply to gatherings in social spaces on church property and certainly not to daily life. This is one reason why we suggest using a casual, non-liturgical setting so that liturgical space is preserved as the place for explicit Advent music. Parishes without a large parish hall might convert the worship space for a carol festival that would take place outside of the context of the liturgy. Keep in mind that what makes liturgical sense to practicing Catholics can be very confusing or even irrelevant to inactive believers and to unchurched people at large. So we need ways to open and maintain active communication with our culture, especially in the area of evangelization.

Question 4: How much is it going to cost my parish to implement this project?

Minimum expenses include: printing materials for training and for events; mailing birthday letters to Jesus; multiple copies of the *Christmas Carol Festival* guidebooks and one copy of the CD *Christmas Carol Tools for Success*, for team members. Optional items might include: materials for constructing an empty manger; dollar store prizes for the ice breaker during the *Festival*; costumes for Mary and Joseph; fees for the use of a hall or a stipend for a speaker at a follow-up event like *Jesus in January* (although we recommend that a parish member do the speaking). Maximum expenses would involve hiring a director of parish evangelization to coordinate projects like the *Christmas Carol Festival* project and all of its components, plus future projects and programs.

Question 5: What kind of symbols or decorations would be helpful?



In our opinion, it is best to let an Advent atmosphere prevail, rather than a full blown Christmas display with decorations. The best Christmas symbol to highlight is the crèche and the empty manger. The empty manger can be surrounded by shredded paper to imitate hay and to symbolize our technology driven world. A symbolic gift may be placed near the manger. One might also add a tree with just a few white lights or an image of Our Lady of Guadeloupe (Dec. 12), or a costumed St. Nicholas (Dec. 6) who kneels at the manger during the closing prayer. Another option is a series of tables with crèches that are sturdy enough to be displayed in a public setting. Participants could even bring crèches.

Question 6: Advent is already too busy, aren't we wasting our time?

It is true that we would be competing with activities like shopping, social celebrations and vacation time. But a growing number of people are doing most of their shopping online, and there is a steady drop in the number of people who go to holiday parties. We suggest that when decisions are made about offering a *Carol Festival* that you choose a specific age group or parish sub-groups and schedule the *Carol Festival* when they are

most likely to be free. Another caution: Train active Catholics to reach out to and invite marginal, inactive and unchurched people **FIRST**, and then invite churchgoing friends and family.

Jesus went out of his home town to find people in need of faith, healing and teaching, both in season and out of season. If we wait until after Christmas, we are like fishermen with an undersized net, who missed an important opportunity to help inactive Catholics establish or sustain a deeper connection with the church.

When he finished speaking, [Jesus] said to Simon, "Push the boat out further to the deep water, and you and your partners let down your nets for a catch."

"Master", Simon answered, "We worked hard all night long and caught nothing. But if you say so, I will let down the nets". They let them down and caught such a large number of fish that the nets were about to break... Luke 5:4-6

Using Advent as a time of outreach to inactive Catholics helps a parish develop the evangelistic attitudes and the skills required for one-to-one faith sharing. We encourage them to cast out the nets of personal relationships, service and prayer, as they respond to the spiritual needs of loved ones and associates. The preservation phase focuses on growth teaching and small groups sharing, as tools for connecting the Gospel message with daily life.

Question 7: Why not just sing carols at home or at parties?

Of course you can sing carols with family and friends! What would make your gathering the kind of *Christmas Carol Festival* that we propose is your goal. We are all on a mission from God! Our concern is not just having fun with songs, or mere attendance at Christmas Masses, but the faith that creates joyful participation in Christmas celebrations of all kinds. We are evangelists by virtue of our baptism. In accepting the mission of Jesus, we become more aware of God's loving invitation to those around us and hopefully, more compassionate for the spiritual and emotional needs that are often amplified during a holiday season.

God's Holy Spirit will guide us and set us ablaze with a new love for the biological and spiritual families that we are called to serve:

The person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn.
(Pope Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World*, 24)

The goal of a *Carol Festival* in a home is to enjoy the spiritual dimensions of these traditional Christmas songs and experiencing their inner power. In doing so, we join many, many generations of our ancestors in worshipping God. A *Carol Festival* in the home would include the deliberate use of Jesus-centered Christmas carols as the majority

of the songs, an opportunity for faith sharing, a Scripture reading and time for prayer with a crèche as a centerpiece. Carols might also piggyback an existing family ritual like putting up a tree or watching the Yule log on television. Take the time to share your desires and plans with one or two family members several weeks or months ahead of time and pray for everyone who might come. We know of several grandparents who gather their families for carols and the acting out of the Christmas story every year, one on the Feast of St Nicholas, and another at a time when all the grandchildren are on Christmas vacation. The second grandmother has even turned over the task of writing a new play about the birth of Jesus to her teenage grandchildren.

Question 8: How can I interest my parish in the *Christmas Carol Festival* project?

- Ask God to give you a burning desire to share your faith with others.
- Pray for your parish and its staff. No one can make people evangelize. They have to be inspired by the Holy Spirit.
- Pray for the people in your everyday life, so that they will be ready to hear the Good News. Watch for an openness to share faith, or a desire for new faith.
- Share information about the *Christmas Carol Festival* project with a staff or parish council member. Give them a very specific amount of time to think about it (i.e. two weeks). Then come back and ask about their reactions to this evangelization project. If this project is not possible now, find others who are offering a *Carol Festival* and volunteer to help.
- If you are willing to suggest such a project, you should be willing to work on it, and you might even bring the names of several people who are also willing to help.

Question 9: Why does the *Christmas Carol Festival* project focus on one-to-one invitations to events?

The parish bulletin does not reach inactive Catholics, those who attend sporadically, people with literacy problems or the unchurched. Area bulk mailings, signs outside the church, signs in the local supermarket, library or medical offices (with permission of course) can be helpful in reaching a wider audience. Announcements in local newspapers, radio bulletin boards, parish email newsletters and announcements on the Internet are great ideas. All of these avenues only work as reminders that reinforce an earlier invitation. None of them replaces a one-to-one, personal invitation and the relationship behind it. In one parish, a woman invited a young friend who was going through the RCIA process to come to the Festival. Afterwards, this young woman called to thank her, "You probably don't know this", she started," but I was thinking of dropping out of the RCIA. But after last night, I am so excited. Now I know what the RCIA is all about. I feel at home and I'm staying."

The Good News proclaimed by the witness of life sooner or later has to be proclaimed by the word of life. There is no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed. (Pope Paul VI, On Evangelization in the Modern World, No. 22)

Many important studies cite a personal invitation as the strongest reason for returning to church. Effective evangelization is personal and relational. The *Christmas Carol Festival* project is meant to support and encourage active Catholics as they invite their friends and relatives to specific events. It is an evangelization project that familiarizes parishioners with evangelization as a parish goal and helps us fine tune ways the ways we reach out to others as individuals and as a parish.

When we talk about **general evangelization training** during the preparation phase, we are not fostering the stereotype of a pushy, in-your-face, salesman's approach. Rather, we train active Catholics to recognize and invite people who may be ready to take a step closer to God. We provide a way to offer hope to such people. Think of the disciples after the resurrection who could say, "I saw Jesus there!" or "Jesus was here yesterday!" Their joy was contagious. We too are a pilgrim people on the road to Bethlehem. The Gospels remind us to watch for stragglers or for those who might have been left behind. We watch because we know the perils of the wilderness around us. We invite others because we have experienced the Christian community as essential in following Jesus.

Even though many Catholics do not have a clear understanding of the call to evangelize, to witness, and to share faith with others, this call is meant to be a normal part of parish life. While our faith is certainly a very personal matter, it is not meant to be just a private reality. We are given an extraordinary gift, the gift of faith. We each have an essential role to play in living and sharing our faith. This gift of faith is meant to set our hearts ablaze with God's love and color our daily lives, motivating us to befriend people, to share Jesus, and to invite others into the community, to live as disciples, and to practice stewardship.

Question 10: How many volunteers are needed for the Christmas Carol project?

First, you need a steering team of four to eight people who begin meeting in July. This team needs a direct connection to parish leadership, or the leadership of the sponsoring group. We recommend that parish leaders invite people to become members of the team with a letter, phone call or even a one-to-one interview. People who have served on adult education committees or music ministry teams may be interested in such a project. The steering team's primary job is to recruit and train others for various ministries.

Second, the number of volunteers needed is based upon what elements are chosen for the Preparation, Proclamation and Preservation phases. Set reachable and measurable goals for the *Christmas Carol Festival* event and the January follow-up event. There are more than fifteen possible ministries that might develop from year to year. Ministry descriptions begin on page 28 and offer suggested numbers. Be realistic about what can

be done. Remember that the project can provide a successful short-term experience with ministry for many people, as well as an opportunity to train them in one-to-one evangelization. Active volunteers will invite friends, neighbors and relatives, although all parishioners need encouragement to make the extra effort in reaching out to inactive, versus active people.

Question 11: If we have a successful Festival, what comes next?

A parish might use an earlier program called, *From Ashes to Fire*, during the Lenten season. One parish in West Virginia used it. The components they developed look like this: an Evangelistic Ash Wednesday service, followed by a weekly Bible study, a parish retreat shortly after Easter, a pre-Pentecost novena and a Pentecost celebration. During each session of the Bible study people considered one baptismal symbol –like water, oil or the paschal cross. They also filled out cards that recorded information about their own baptisms. These cards were put on display in the vestibule. By the end of the seven weeks there were 300 cards. Their Pentecost celebration will include the signing of the parish mission statement, which will also be on display. A ministry fair will follow shortly after Pentecost.