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Advent: Time for Christian Resistance

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Distinctly Catholic

It is Advent. Time to become a stiff-necked Christian. Seriously.

I do not share Bill Donohue's seemingly boundless capacity for anger, righteous or otherwise, but I admire his campaigns to retain phrases like "Merry Christmas" and to resist the more anodyne "Happy Holidays." I think most of the crèches you find on public property are poorly made and uninviting, but I think our First Amendment jurisprudence has gone overboard when it finds such displays unconstitutional unless surrounded by Santa, reindeer, a menorah, and Frosty the Snowman. I have never liked secular Christmas Carols, not any of them, not "Jingle Bells" or "Jingle Bell Rock" or "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer." I was visibly upset when the local grocery store began putting out Christmas ornaments the week after Halloween!

It is now impossible to ignore just how perniciously our consumer-driven culture has overtaken this most distinctly Catholic of holidays. The Protestant Puritans who founded New England, you will recall, forbid the celebration of Christmas as being too "popish" and perhaps the Gospel of Luke had fallen out of their Bibles. Those Puritans also brought with them a devout and strict Calvinism, step-father of modern capitalism and the consumer economy. So, we RCs have our work cut out for us, and only we can do it.

One of the best ways to grasp the true meaning and import of Christmas, to rekindle a genuine Christmas spirit, is to become poor. As I made the transition from restaurateur to writer, I have had some impoverished Christmases and they were invariably the best, even when it comes to gifts. One year, I was living in Connecticut throughout the autumn because my parents had been in a bad car accident. I went to an apple orchard, bought a bunch of apples and made home-made apple sauce to give to my friends at Christmas. No gift I have ever given has been so wildly appreciated and so often commented upon in later years. My homemade Christmas cards are always a hit. And, of course, when the presents can't "wow" it

is easier to realize how importance the "presence" of loved ones is.

Now, if you are not poor, you can nonetheless take some steps to recapture Christmas from the merchants, and this effort starts with reclaiming the season of Advent. Do not adorn your home with Christmas decorations now; Instead put up an Advent wreath. Or put up a crèche but without the baby Jesus. Definitely have an advent calendar for small children. Make decorating the Christmas tree something the family does on Christmas Eve and something the family does together. Keep your shopping lists modest. If this morning, someone regales you with a story about getting to the stores at 3 a.m. on Black Friday, ask them if they are crazy and ask what any of that has to do with Christmas. Listen to the first part of Handel's Messiah and as a family go to a performance of that work or, even better, a sing-along. Enlist the entire family in cookie-making. In short, develop family traditions that involve spending time together including, of course, prayer together. And talk about the idea of Advent, the sense of expectation. (More on that tomorrow.)

So, don't worry about the new cool toy or the thing, whatever thing it is, that someone you know may want. Think about finding ways to give of yourself, in simple ways. Think of activities that bring your family together other than going to the mall. Insist on answering the greeting "Happy Holidays" with the reply, "And a Merry Christmas to you too." Tell your Jewish neighbor you love the menorah on his lawn but also tell the atheist across the street that his reindeer are tacky! Have some fun, of course "that is always the best revenge against the Puritans. But, cultivating Advent is the best way to keep the consumer culture's filthy paws off of Christmas. Besides, the fashion experts say that purple is in this year!

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