

Signs of the Season: An Advent Retreat

By Maryann Hakowski



Introduction

This day retreat, “Signs of the Season,” is designed for 9-12 grade youth to be held at the start of the season of Advent.

During the secular Christmas season, we are bombarded with messages on TV, on the Internet, in stores, in magazines and other sources that blare out the commercialism of the holidays. What a perfect time to escape from the cacophony, go on retreat and look to scripture, prayer, and reflection to discover the true meaning of Christmas – the birth of our savior, Jesus Christ.

This retreat explores the secular and religious symbols of Christmas to reveal many surprising and challenging messages. Music, video, and common-object meditation are just a few ways to start the discussion.

Component: Prayer & Worship

Goals

- That retreatants look beyond the commercialism of Christmas to experience the everlasting love of God, given to us in the gift of God’s son, Jesus Christ.
- That the retreatants unwrap the gifts of themselves and share those gifts with others.
- That retreatants rediscover the joy of giving and answer a call to service during Advent and beyond.

Retreat at a Glance

9:15 a.m.	Welcome/Introduction
9:30 a.m.	Opening Prayer: <i>Reflection on a Paper Chain</i>
9:50 a.m.	Icebreaker: <i>The Giving Game</i>
10:10 a.m.	Small Group Formation: <i>Gift Nametags</i>
10:20 a.m.	Small Group Discussion: <i>Unwrapping Our Gifts</i>
10:45 a.m.	Break
11:00 a.m.	Small Group Discussion: <i>Hidden Prayers</i>
11:30 a.m.	Lunch
12:15 p.m.	Quiet Time: <i>Reflection on a Candy Cane</i>
12:45 p.m.	Movie and Discussion: <i>Martin the Cobbler</i>
1:30 p.m.	Break
1:45 p.m.	Call to Service: <i>The Empty Creche</i>
2:30 p.m.	Closing Prayer: <i>God’s Love Is Evergreen</i>

Materials Needed

- Gift tag nametags (see #1 in Prepare in Advance)
- Markers
- Pens or pencils, one for each retreatant
- Strips of 1 in. by 6 in. construction paper in a variety of colors, one for each person
- Stapler
- Pennies, five for each participant
- Shoe boxes, one for each group (see #2 in Prepare in Advance)
- Large sheets of white paper
- Transparent tape
- Ribbon or yarn
- Red and green markers
- Paper bags, one for each group
- Assorted Christmas objects, 15-20 for each group (see #3 in Prepare in Advance)
- Paper
- **Handout 1, Reflection on a Candy Cane**, one for each retreatant (see #4 in Prepare in Advance)
- Small traditional red and white candy canes, one for each person
- Transparent tape
- Movie: "Martin the Cobbler," (Billy Budd Films, 1977, 27 minutes) based on the classic story by Leo Tolstoy

Note to Leader: Many parishes or diocesan resource centers have a copy of this in their library. It is also available from Amazon:

http://www.amazon.com/Martin-Cobbler-Alexandra-Tolstoy/dp/B0007GP7M8/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=dvd&qid=1242234260&sr=1-1 for \$19.95.

- Large screen TV and DVD player or large blank wall and DVD projector

Note to Leader: Your audio visual set up needs to be adequate for everyone to be able to hear/see the movie.

- **Handout 2, Martin's Message**, one for every three retreatants
- A large, empty crèche (manger)
- CD player or iPod player
- "Another Day in Paradise" by Phil Collins or "Do They Know It's Christmas?" by Band Aid
- Pens or pencils
- Strips of yellow paper, 8½ inches by 2 inches, one for each person
- Scissors
- Construction paper in a variety of colors (see #5 in Prepare in Advance)
- String or yarn
- Hole puncher

- A small Christmas tree
- **Handout 3, God's Love is Everlasting, Evergreen**, one for each person
- Pinecones
- Pens or pencils
- Litany of the Trees reading
- Worship aids or hymnbooks
- Prayer focus: small table covered with a cloth, Bible, basket containing the construction paper ornaments, a pillar candle (and matches or lightstick)

Note to Leader: You will need space to add the crèche to the prayer focus after the 'Call to Service: Empty Crèche' activity.

Prepare in Advance

1. **Gift Nametags.** Before the retreat, form groups of 6-8 people. Take care to balance shy and rowdy youth, mix girls and guys, and mix younger and older youth. Assign one retreat team member per group. You may also want to divide up cliques to encourage all to meet new people while on retreat. Assign one type of gift tag to each group. Write names of retreatants on the gift-tag nametags and give them out as teens arrive for the retreat. Ask them to wear the nametags where they are easily visible to all.
2. **Unwrapping Our Gifts.** Wrap each shoebox in white paper and tie a bow with ribbon or yarn. On each box, use the red and green markers to write 8-12 questions such as the following:
 - What is the best Christmas gift you have ever received? Why?
 - What is your favorite symbol of Christmas? Why?
 - Name one of your gifts or talents.
 - What is the best gift you have ever given? Why?
 - If you could have anything you wanted for Christmas, what would it be? Why?
 - Name one person who really gives of himself or herself.
 - How could you give more of your time to help others?
 - What is one non-material gift you would like to give to your family?
 - How can you better share your gifts and talents with others?
 - How can you thank God for all he has given to you?
3. **Hidden Prayers.** Collect 15-20 assorted Christmas objects, one for each group so the bags are identical. Some possibilities include: star, ornament, ornament hook, Christmas stocking, piece of mistletoe, evergreen branch, Christmas light bulb, candle, cookie cutter, strips of red and green construction paper, holly, bell, Christmas card, plate with a holiday pattern, small wreath, piece of Christmas candy.

4. **Reflection on a Candy Cane.** Copy Handout 1 onto pink or red paper, fold them into thirds and tape a small candy cane to each copy.
5. **God's Love is Evergreen.** Cut out construction paper ornaments, one for each person. Use a variety of shapes that are connected with Christmas – a bell, star, candy cane, etc. Attach a piece of string or yarn to the top of each ornament.
6. Invite a young person to read “Litany of the Trees” for the closing prayer. Provide a copy of **Resource 1** to practice in advance of the retreat.
- 7.

Detailed Retreat Outline

9:15 a.m. Welcome

Note to Leader: The welcome talk is intended to put everyone at ease, to give them an idea of what to expect, to introduce the team members and to encourage active participation in all retreat activities. Consider asking a teen team member to welcome participants and an adult team member to introduce the theme. Distribute nametags as retreatants arrive.

Points to consider:

- Greet retreatants and let them know how happy the team is that they all came on the retreat. Introduce the teen and adult retreat team members.
- Give the retreatants an idea of the types of activities to expect – discussions, icebreakers, music, prayer, etc.
- Emphasize that everyone has something valuable to share and that everyone is needed to make the retreat a success.
- Ask retreatants to join in asking God's blessing on the retreat.
- Encourage them to be open to the gift of others and the gifts of God.

Introduction

You may want to introduce the theme in these or similar words:

- It is beginning to look a lot like Christmas! Some people celebrate the holiday with giant displays of decorations, piles of Christmas cards, shopping sprees and parties galore. Others prefer a more quiet celebration with a greater emphasis on the religious aspect of the holy day. We all celebrate Christmas in a different way. Some focus on the importance of family and continuing unique ethnic and family traditions passed down from previous generations.

- It is easy to get caught up in the commercialism surrounding Christmas, but we can try to discover and celebrate the beautiful rituals and traditions that are part of the Catholic Christian celebration of Christmas.
- During our retreat today, we will look at some of the signs of the season—the rich symbols of Christmas—and see if we together can learn more about the real meaning of Christmas.
- We will talk about the act of giving, the gifts we are, and how we can unwrap those gifts to share with others. The nametags you are wearing are reminders that each of you is a unique gift created by God.
- The day will include an icebreaker, small and large group discussion, a movie, music, quiet time, and prayer. We will wrap up with a call to service and a reflection on God’s everlasting love.
- It is important to participate in everything we do today. What you each have to offer is valuable.

9:30 a.m. Opening Prayer: *Reflection on a Paper Chain*

This shared prayer asks God’s blessing on the community of youth gathered for retreat and gives them an opportunity to offer prayers of petition.

Give each person (including the team) a strip of construction paper. Staple yours into a loop, offer a brief prayer for the retreat, and pass your loop and the stapler around the group. Each person then attaches their own link to the paper chain as they offer a prayer for the retreat. Encourage retreatants to quietly listen and pray for each person’s petition.

Close with a prayer in these or similar words:

Dear God, thank you for making each of us so unique, like the many colors of this paper chain. Thank you for bringing us together to celebrate this retreat. Give us the courage to participate, because each of us is an important link in the success of this day.

Help us to discover you in the many signs of the season we will reflect on—from the links of this paper chain to the beauty of a Christmas tree. Most of all, let us never forget that it is our faith in you that makes us strong and connects us together.

We ask your blessings through Christ, our Lord, whom we await with joy in the coming of Christmas. Amen.

When the paper chain is completed, hang it up in a very visible spot in your meeting area. Ask retreatants to keep each other's intentions in their prayers during the day.

Alternative: If the youth are new to shared prayer, you may want to give them the option of praying silently as they attach the link. You may also want to ask them to write their prayer on the slip of paper before prayer begins.

9:50 a.m. Icebreaker: *The Giving Game*

This icebreaker gets retreatants moving and interacting with each other. It also gets them thinking about the simple act of giving.

Distribute five pennies to each person and give the following or similar directions:

We will be using the pennies today to play an icebreaker called The Giving Game. The Giving Game has two different parts. Please listen very carefully to the directions.

The goal of the first part of the game is to give away as many pennies as you can. You may give them to anyone, but you need to move quickly so that you have given away all of your pennies before time is called. While you are giving away pennies, you will also be receiving them. Try to give these pennies away, too. You may not hide or discard pennies. You must give them to another person.

You have three minutes. Go!

(After three minutes, call time and ask everyone to take a seat.)

The goal of the second part of the game is to get as many pennies as you can. You may get them from anyone, but you need to move quickly so that you are the person with the most pennies when time is called. You may not steal pennies from anyone. You must ask them and convince them to give you their pennies.

You have three minutes. Go!

(After three minutes, call time and ask everyone to take a seat.)

Ask retreatants which version of the game they liked playing better and why. Then, ask what they learned from playing this game. Some possible responses:

- It is better to give than receive.
- Those who give also receive.
- It is fun to give to others.
- We like to be around generous people.
- The act of giving can sometimes mean more than the actual gift.

10:10 a.m. Small Group Formation: *Gift Nametags*

Ask retreatants to find the rest of the people with the same type gift tag nametag and sit at a table together. Once everyone is settled, tell them these will be their small groups for discussions and other activities throughout the retreat.

Why do you think gift tags were chosen for nametags for this retreat?

Some possible responses:

- Each person is a gift.
- We need to encourage each other to share our gifts.
- We are a gift we give to ourselves.
- We are a gift from God.
- God has given each of us unique gifts and talents.

I encourage each of you to respect the giftedness of each person in your group and to be open to sharing during all discussions and activities.

Alternative: You may also attach miniature bows to regular nametags. The colors of the bows could indicate discussion groups.

10:10 a.m. Small Group Discussion: *Unwrapping Our Gifts*

Retreatants are invited to share the gift of themselves in their first small-group discussion.

Give one gift box to each small discussion group. Ask retreatants to pass the box around the group. Each person chooses a question to answer. Challenge youth to be open and honest in answering the questions – to share their answers and reasons for answering as they did.

Begin with the person wearing the most green and red in the group. Allow the box to go around the circle at least five times. If time permits, the retreatants may add some questions of their own

10:45 a.m. Break

11:00 a.m. Small Group Discussion: *Hidden Prayers*

Retreatants are encouraged to use their imagination, explore the meaning of Christmas symbols and find some hidden prayers.

Give a bag of items to each small group. Ask them to remove the items from the bag and spread them out on their table. Then, ask the retreatants to use their imagination to find the hidden prayers in each object. Some examples:

- Ornament hook: Dear God, help me to be the link between you and others.

- Mistletoe: Dear Lord, help me to show others how much I love them.
- Tinsel: Lord, help me to see the good in others and let them shine.

Allow time for each group to consider and write down prayers for each item. Ask a spokesperson from each group to share two or three prayer examples with all the retreatants. Encourage retreatants to look at the symbols of the season – both secular and religious, to find Christ hidden there.

Alternative: Take time to contrast the religious symbols of Advent and Christmas with the secular symbols of the season.

11:30 a.m. Lunch

12:15 p.m. Quiet Time: *Reflection on a Candy Cane*

A candy cane is use as the focus for prayer and reflection during quiet reflection time.

Introduce quiet time by saying:

Quiet time is an important part of every retreat, a chance to reflect on our relationship with God and on what we are experiencing during the retreat. During this very hectic, commercial, noisy time of year, quiet time is much needed to truly prepare for the birth of our Savior.

Hand out the reflection papers and candy canes. Ask retreatants to find a quiet spot alone, where they will not be distracted by others.

Alternative: You may provide paper so teens may journal during quiet time. You may also want to provide Bibles with the passages marked – of both the infancy narrative and passion of Jesus – for prayer and reflection.

12:45 p.m. Movie and Discussion: *Martin the Cobbler*

This activity helps retreatants realize that sometimes we must look beyond the obvious to find the true spirit of Christmas in all those around us.

During the Advent and Christmas seasons, there are a wide variety of movies shown with messages about the real meaning of Christmas, if we only watch them with a critical eye. We're going to watch "Martin the Cobbler," based on a story by Leo Tolstoy. While it's an older movie, pay attention to the message contained in the story as it unfolds.

Show the movie. Next, divide retreatants into small groups of three, distribute **Handout 2, Martin's Message**, to the groups, and ask them to answer the questions and record their answers on the handout.

Invite a spokesperson from each group to share responses in the large group.

Encourage retreatants to think about the movies they choose to watch. Ask them to look for the messages in these movies and make connections with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ – not only during the Christmas season, but all year round.

Alternative 1: If you are unable to obtain this DVD, choose another Christmas classic – or a clip of a full-length movie – and ask teens to find the message there about the real meaning of Christmas.

Alternative 2: Ask retreatants to list some of the ways Christmas is portrayed in movies and on television. Compare and contrast these messages to Gospel values.

1:30 p.m. Break

1:45 p.m. A Call to Service: *The Empty Crèche*

This activity reminds retreatants that one way to prepare during Advent for the coming of the Lord is through service to others.

Gather everyone together around a large, empty crèche in a prayer room or chapel. Play one of the songs listed above or one with a similar, powerful message.

Offer a reflection on the empty crèche and the song you chose. The ideas below are a starting point:

- The empty crèche reminds us that the Advent season is a time of waiting, a time of waiting for the Christ Child to be born on Christmas Day.
- We wait and we hope for this special day, but Advent is a time for more than waiting. It is also a time for taking action. John the Baptist tells us to “prepare the way of the Lord.” (Mark 1:3)
- The song we have just heard reminds us of how lucky we are in many ways, but also reminds us of the need to reach out and help others.

Hand out pens and the yellow strips of paper. Ask retreatants to each think of one specific thing they can do during Advent to help others, to prepare the way of the Lord.

Play the song again. Invite retreatants to write their service pledge on the paper, and when finished, come forward and place their paper (fashioned like straw) into the empty crèche.

Conclude by asking all present to keep those in need – in our parish, community, nation and world – in their prayers.

2:30 p.m. Closing Prayer: God's Love is Evergreen

This prayer service brings the retreat to a close by reflecting on the Christmas tree as one possible symbol of God's evergreen, everlasting love for each of us.

Place a small Christmas tree in the center of your chapel or prayer room. Keep the crèche from the last activity in sight to remind retreatants of their pledges. Distribute **Handout 3, God's Love is Everlasting, Evergreen**, a pinecone, and a pen or pencil to each person.

4. Prepare a brief reflection on a pinecone.

Teach "I Have Loved You" by Michael Joncas, OCP Publications, 1979 or another appropriate closing song.

Ask retreatants to choose a paper ornament from the basket on the prayer table, then give these directions:

Take a few minutes to reflect on your retreat experience today and then write a brief prayer on the paper ornament. This should be a prayer for you for the season of Advent. During our closing prayer we will share our prayers with each other.

Allow a few minutes for them to complete their prayer. Draw their attention to the prayer sheet (**Handout 3**), and follow the order of prayer.

Here are some ideas for the pinecone reflection:

Reflection on a Pinecone

Pinecones come from evergreen trees. Just as these trees are always green, they are a reminder that God's love for us is everlasting and unconditional.

A pinecone points down when it hangs on the tree, facing the earth. After it falls, it often faces the sky, open to heaven. This reminds us of Jesus Christ, both human and divine, who is our link between earth and heaven.

Just as no two pinecones are exactly alike, no two people are exactly alike either. Each of us has our own unique gifts and talents.

We ask God to help us share our gifts and always be open to the gift of God's evergreen, everlasting love.

At the end of the prayer, thank the young people for their participation, and thank the team who helped with today's retreat.

This retreat was written by [Maryann Hakowski](#), Pastoral Associate, Youth Minister, at Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Virginia Beach, Virginia.

Additional activities you may want to consider:

- At the end of the retreat, place names in a bag and ask retreatants to choose prayer partners. Ask them to pray for this person and their intentions throughout the Advent season.
- If you offer this retreat at the very start of Advent, you can ask the young people who attended the retreat and other youth in your school or parish community, to add links and prayers to the paper chain throughout the season.
- Consider using the pennies from the Giving Game to start a collection effort for a worthy cause. It can begin at this retreat and continue throughout the school year. It can also extend beyond youth ministry to the wider parish community. For example, my parish collects Pennies for Prescriptions to help senior citizens pay for their much-needed medicines.
- Invite youth to share some of their favorite Christmas stories – they can be storybooks, family tales, or ones they have seen as movies. What can storytelling teach us about the real meaning of Christmas? Close by reading one of the Nativity sequences from Scripture.
- Share with youth that the season our church celebrates as Advent is what others consider Christmas – the days and weeks before Christmas. When our church is celebrating the Christmas season, the rest of the world has already moved on, even tossing out Christmas trees on December 26. Ask youth for specific ideas to keep the celebrations of Advent and Christmas distinct, and not get caught up in the commercialism of secular Christmas.
- Give each youth a copy of an Advent calendar. Encourage them to fill up the days between your retreat and Christmas with ideas for prayer, service and ways to honor and celebrate family.

Acknowledgements

1. The Giving Game icebreaker is adapted from a presentation by Wayne Rice, "Congratulations, You're Gifted," given at the National Catholic Youth Conference in Kentucky, December 1989.
2. The "Litany of the Trees" poem, found in the closing prayer, was written by Joanne R. Bobek, a coworker at the Department of Youth Ministry, Diocese of Allentown. It was written sometime in the late 1980s. Exact date is unknown.

3. The Christmas tree blessing, found in the closing prayer, is adapted from "Holiday Spirituality in the Home" Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown.
4. There are many versions of the candy cane reflection. The source is unknown.

Handout 1

Reflection on a Candy Cane

No season is so rich in signs and symbols as Christmas. Many of these signs and symbols relate to the birth of Christ. For example, a star reminds us of the star that led the wise men to Bethlehem, an evergreen tree reminds us of eternal life with God, and a candle reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world.

One symbol, the candy cane, represents a shepherd's crook. Remember the scene – the shepherds were on a hillside watching their flocks by night, crook in hand, when the angels of the Lord appeared unto them and announced our Savior's birth.

A shepherd used his crook to reach out and bring sheep to him when they went astray. With the other end of the crook, the shepherd would fight off wild animals, just as we must fight off the evil forces in our life.

The traditional colors of the candy cane are red and white. Red stands for sacrifice, white for purity. The body of the cane is white, representing a life of purity, which Jesus lived. Jesus tells us: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

The broad red strip is symbolic of our Lord's sacrifice for us and of the blood he shed for our sins. We must always remember that the

baby in the manger became the Christ of the cross – he gave his life in sacrifice for our sins. The smaller red stripes symbolize the sacrifices we must make as Christians in bearing witness to Christ.



Candy canes taste of peppermint, a flavor similar to the herb hyssop. The psalmist pleaded, "Cleanse me of sin with hyssop, that I may be purified; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:9). Hyssop is used not only for its taste but also for medicinal purposes. The candy cane suggests a healing nature. It is symbolic of Christ, for we are told that we are "healed by his wounds" (1 Peter 2:24).

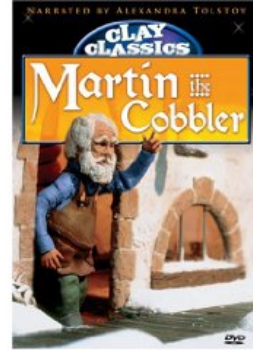
The candy cane can be broken into pieces and shared. Remember Jesus' statement after breaking the bread: "This is my body, which is for you." (1 Corinthians 11: 24). Just as Jesus' body is broken in order to be shared, so our life, as good stewards, must be shared; for we come to realize that as children of God, "only as we give, shall we live!"

Remember these reflections on the candy cane as you place it on your tree this Christmas season.

Handout 2

Martin's Message

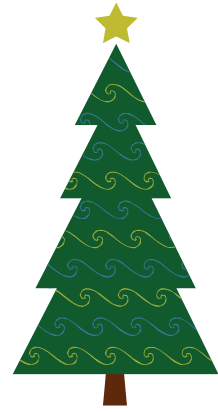
After viewing the DVD of "Martin the Cobbler," discuss the following questions with your group and ask one person to record the group's responses below.



1. What message was God trying to send to Martin?
2. What message does "Martin the Cobbler" have for you?
3. Can you think of any other movies with a similar message? Give the name of the movie and a brief description of the plot and message.
4. Share a movie you have seen with a different message. What did you learn from this movie?

Handout 3

God's Love is Everlasting, Evergreen



Gather

"O Christmas Tree"

Prayer Leader:

Give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, God's love is everlasting.

All: **Let the people of Israel say, "God's love is everlasting."**

Prayer Leader:

Let the servants of God say, "God's love is everlasting."

All: **Let all who worship God say, God's love is everlasting."**

[Based on Psalm 118]

Listen

"Litany of the Trees"

Respond

Prayer Leader: Reflection on a Pinecone



Shared Prayer

Each person is invited to read their ornament prayer and place it on the tree. Response to each prayer: **Bless us with your everlasting love.**

Go Forth

Blessing of the Christmas Tree

Prayer Leader:

God, we ask your blessing on this tree and the people gathered around it. May its ever-greenness be a sign in our life of the hope of the Christmas season; its ornaments, a sign of the joy of the Christmas season; and the gifts beneath it, a sign of the love of the Christmas season. We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

"I Have Loved You" by Michael Joncas, 1979, OCP Publications

Resource 1

Litany of the Trees

Bare and barren trees
Bless the Lord
Tall and evergreen trees
Bushy shrubs
Stately spruces
Brilliant red maples
Sturdy oaks
All you multicolored, golden and crimson trees

Walnuts and hickory
Beech and willow
All you many and varied conifers

Softwood and hardwood
Dwarfed and topiary
Pines and hemlocks
Palm and eucalyptus

All you fruitbearing trees

Dogwood and poplar
Tulip and juniper
Blossoming and shedding trees

Sassafras

Olive and banyan
Giant redwoods
Blowing and bending trees

All you snow-covered trees.
Bless the Lord and give praise to God's name.



By Joanne Bobek