

## O Gates, Lift High Your Heads: Preparing the Heart to Receive the Newborn King

### A Four-Week Advent Journey in the Spirit of the Spiritual Exercises

#### Introduction

“O gates, lift high your heads, grow higher, ancient doors, let Him enter, the King of Glory.”

— Psalm 24:7

Advent is the season when this Psalm becomes flesh. The “ancient doors” are not only the gates of Jerusalem, but the doors of our own hearts. The Incarnation is God Himself pressing at the threshold, humbly asking to enter. St. Ignatius teaches us to meet Christ not in abstraction but in encounter—to imagine Him knocking, to feel His gaze, to welcome Him into the rooms we often keep closed. Each day of this retreat is a lifting of the gate, a widening of the door, until on Christmas we discover that the King of Glory has entered not only the world, but us.

#### How to Use This Retreat in Daily Life

This retreat is meant to be a companion, not a burden. A few simple helps can make the journey prayerful and sustainable:

- Set aside about 20 minutes a day for prayer. Morning, lunch, or evening—whatever fits your life.
- Create a prayer space: light a candle, hold a rosary or crucifix, or simply quiet your heart.
- Keep a journal nearby to note what stirs in you—whether a word, image, or question.
- If you miss a day, don’t panic. Return where you left off, or step back in with the current day.
- Above all, come as you are. God delights in your desire to be with Him, not in your performance.

The goal is not to finish perfectly, but to open the gates of your heart wider each day to the King of Glory.

Advent is a season of waiting — but not passive waiting. It is a season of intentional, hopeful preparation. The Church invites us to prepare not only our homes and liturgies, but our hearts.

This retreat is a four-week journey modeled loosely on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, adapted to the rhythm of Advent. It is not meant to overwhelm or burden you, but to provide a clear and prayerful path toward the coming of Christ — not only in history, but in your own life.

## Structure

Each week focuses on a different stage of encounter and preparation:

Week 1: God's Love — the foundation of all prayer

Week 2: The Principle and Foundation — who you are and why you exist

Week 3: The Coming of Christ — Gospel meditations on His birth

Week 4: Beholding the Mystery — contemplation and reception of Jesus

Begin each day of prayer by reviewing the "Grace to Ask For" prompt, and feel free to use your own. Then review the day's Scripture verses and pray with them in the suggested Ignatian method. Each week closes with a day to reflect on the week's prayer experiences, return to Scripture verses or scenes that moved you, and sift for new graces or savor old ones. Sundays are set aside for Mass and the Ignatian Examen prayer.

## Prayer Primer: How to Pray with This Retreat

This retreat uses the Ignatian approach to prayer — which is not about reading as much as it is about encounter...

### 1. Begin with Presence

Find a quiet place. Take a few deep breaths.

Ask God to be present — and ask for the specific grace listed (or one you feel moved to ask for).

Say a simple prayer like: "Lord, I believe You are here. Help me to hear You."

### 2. Read Slowly and Attentively

Choose one of the two Scripture readings.

Read it slowly — even aloud if possible.

Let the words sink in. Pay attention to what stirs, comforts, or challenges you.

### 3. Meditation or Contemplation

Meditation means pondering the meaning: "What does this say about God? What does it say to me?"

Contemplation means placing yourself in the scene: What do you see? Hear? Smell? Be there. Be with Christ. Respond.

#### 4. Speak with God (Colloquy)

Ignatius encourages ending prayer by speaking to God as one friend speaks to another...

#### 5. Close with Gratitude

Thank God for the time you shared, no matter how "well" it went..

### The Examen Prayer

The Examen is a prayer of reflection and gratitude, offered at the end of the day. It helps us see where God has been present, and how we can respond more faithfully tomorrow.

#### 1. Place yourself in God's presence

Begin with the Sign of the Cross. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your memory with honesty and clarity.

#### 2. Give thanks

Look back over the day. Notice the gifts you received—moments of grace, joy, or peace. Thank God for them.

#### 3. Review the day

Walk slowly through the hours of your day. Where did you sense God near you? Where did you miss Him? Be attentive to both light and shadow.

#### 4. Face your shortcomings

Acknowledge where you fell short—impatience, distraction, sin. Ask for God's mercy with trust, not fear.

#### 5. Look ahead

Ask for strength, hope, and attentiveness for tomorrow. Place yourself in God's hands and entrust your coming day to Him.

### Week 1: Encountering the Love of God

Theme: God's love is personal, active, and constant — even in our sin and weakness.

Grace to Ask For: That I might know and feel more deeply how much I am loved by God.

Day 1 – The Gaze of the Father

Primary Scripture: Luke 15:11–32

Alternate Scripture: Isaiah 49:14–16

Meditation prompts:

- What is it like to let Him see me as I really am?
- When He looks at me, what expression do I imagine on His face?
- Where in my life do I most long for the Father's embrace?

Day 2 – Created in Love

Primary Scripture: Psalm 139:1–18

Alternate Scripture: Ephesians 1:3–6

Meditation prompts:

How does it feel to hear, “You are wonderfully made”?

Where in my body or my story do I struggle to believe that truth?

Can I sit for a moment simply receiving God's delight in me?

Day 3 – The Broken Heart of God

Primary Scripture: Hosea 11:1–9

Alternate Scripture: John 11:32–36

Meditation prompts:

How does God respond to my turning away?

What does it mean that God's heart “recoils” at punishing?

Can I let myself imagine the tears of Christ as meant for me?

Day 4 – The God Who Seeks

Primary Scripture: Genesis 3:1–10

Alternate Scripture: Revelation 3:20

Meditation prompts:

- Can I hear Him knocking—gently, patiently—at the door of my heart?
- What would it be like to let Him find me there?
- Where am I hiding from God today?

Day 5 – The Cost of Love

Primary Scripture: Romans 5:6–11

Alternate Scripture: Isaiah 53:4–7

Meditation prompts:

What does it mean that Christ died “while we were still sinners”?

Where do I feel unworthy of love, and how does the Cross answer that?

How do I want to respond to such a costly gift?

Day 6 – Review, Rest, or Return

Choose one of the Scriptures that moved you this week.

What stayed with me? Where did I feel stirred, comforted, or resistant?

✠ “God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.” — St. Augustine

■ “God calls man first... the living and true God tirelessly calls each person to that mysterious encounter known as prayer.” — CCC 2567

Day 7 – Sunday Liturgy and Examen

Attend Mass and make time for a 15 minute Examen

“What is God saying to me through the Church’s liturgy this Sunday?”

Week 2: Principle and Foundation

Theme: We are created for God. Freedom, order, and detachment allow us to live for Him fully.

Grace to Ask For: That I might see my life rightly — ordered toward God and free from attachments.

Day 1 – Created to Praise, Reverence, and Serve

Primary Scripture: Colossians 1:15–20

Alternate Scripture: Revelation 4:11

Meditation prompts:

- Where might my praise be misdirected?
- How does creation point me back to Christ as its center?
- What do I praise most easily in my daily life?

Day 2 – Freedom and Detachment

Primary Scripture: Philippians 3:7–11

Alternate Scripture: 1 Corinthians 7:29–31

Meditation prompts:

What am I clinging to that keeps me from deeper freedom?

How does letting go feel—fearful or liberating?

What treasure do I find in Christ that surpasses all others?

Day 3 – Ordering Our Loves

Primary Scripture: Matthew 6:19–34

Alternate Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:4–9

Meditation prompts:

- What treasure do I find in Christ that surpasses all others?
- How does letting go feel—fearful or liberating?
- What am I clinging to that keeps me from deeper freedom?

Day 4 – Time Is Short, Eternity Is Long

Primary Scripture: 1 Peter 1:3–9

Alternate Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:16–18

Meditation prompts:

How much of my energy goes toward things that pass away?

Where do I glimpse the “eternal weight of glory” already?

How might God be calling me to live today in light of eternity?

Day 5 – Choose This Day

Primary Scripture: Joshua 24:14–15

Alternate Scripture: Sirach 15:15–20

Meditation prompts:

What small daily choices show whom I truly serve?

If I had to choose Christ today in a visible way, what would that look like?

Where is God inviting me to renewed fidelity?

Day 6 – Review, Rest, or Return

Choose one of the Scriptures that moved you this week.

What attachments surfaced? What invitations to reorder my life did I hear?

“Let nothing disturb you... God alone suffices.” — St. Teresa of Ávila

“God put us in the world to know, to love, and to serve him, and so to come to paradise.” — CCC 1721

Day 7 – Sunday Liturgy and Examen

Attend Mass and make time for a 15 minute Examen

How is God calling me to prepare for His coming more deeply?

Week 3: The Coming King

Theme: The mystery of the Incarnation begins to unfold — a King hidden in humility.

Grace to Ask For: That I might prepare a place for Christ and walk with Him through His coming.

Day 1 – The Annunciation: Let It Be to Me

Primary Scripture: Luke 1:26–38

Alternate Scripture: Philippians 2:5–11

Meditation prompts:

Where in my life is God inviting me to say, “Let it be done”?

What fears or doubts rise up in me as I hear His call?

Can I let Mary's "yes" teach me how to respond?

Day 2 – The Visitation: Leaping for Joy

Primary Scripture: Luke 1:39–56

Alternate Scripture: 2 Samuel 6:9–15

Meditation prompts:

What stirs joy in me when I encounter Christ in another?

How might I carry Christ to someone else today?

Where do I need to let my soul magnify the Lord?

Day 3 – Joseph's Fiat: Righteous and Afraid

Primary Scripture: Matthew 1:18–25

Alternate Scripture: Psalm 112:1–7

Meditation prompts:

Where do I feel "righteous but afraid," like Joseph?

How do I hear God's reassurance: "Do not fear to take...?"

What concrete step of obedience is He asking of me?

Day 4 – The Journey to Bethlehem: Carried by Obedience

Primary Scripture: Luke 2:1–5

Alternate Scripture: Micah 5:1–4a

Meditation prompts:

Where in my life am I being carried by obedience rather than comfort?

What is tiring about this journey—and what hope sustains me?

How might God's promises strengthen me along the way?

Day 5 – No Room at the Inn: Making Space for Christ

Primary Scripture: Luke 2:6–7

Alternate Scripture: Revelation 3:20

Meditation prompts:

- What would it mean to give Him space tonight?
- Where do I feel the poverty and humility of His birth?
- What parts of my life are 'too full' for Christ to enter?

Day 6 – Review, Rest, or Return

Choose one of the Scriptures that moved you this week.

What part of the story drew me in most deeply? Where do I resist the humility of Christ?

✠ “God became man so that man might become God.” — St. Athanasius

■ “The Word became flesh to be our model of holiness: ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me.’”  
— CCC 459

Day 7 – Sunday Liturgy and Examen

Attend Mass and make time for a 15 minute Examen

What light is Advent revealing in me? What is still hidden that Christ wants to enter?

Week 4: Behold the Mystery

Theme: The Word is made flesh — vulnerable, glorious, and present.

Grace to ask for: That I might receive Christ with wonder, humility, and joy — and carry Him to others.

Day 1 – Shepherds: Watchers of the Night

Primary Scripture: Luke 2:8–20

Alternate Scripture: Psalm 130

Meditation prompts:

Where do I feel like a watchman in the dark, waiting?

What is it like to hear good news burst into that darkness?

How might I share the joy I've seen?

Day 2 – Mary: Pondering in Her Heart

Primary Scripture: Luke 2:19

Alternate Scripture: Proverbs 4:20–27

Meditation prompts:

What word or moment from God do I need to ponder quietly?

How does Mary teach me to treasure rather than rush?

Where is God asking me to keep my heart guarded and attentive?

Day 3 – The Word Made Flesh

Primary Scripture: John 1:1–14

Alternate Scripture: Colossians 1:15–20

Meditation prompts:

How does it strike me that the eternal Word became flesh?

Where do I struggle to believe He comes into my world, my body, my life?

What does it mean that “we have seen His glory”?

Day 4 – Light in the Darkness

Primary Scripture: Isaiah 60:1–3

Alternate Scripture: John 8:12

Meditation prompts:

Where in my life do I most need Christ’s light?

How does His light change the way I see myself and others?

What darkness is He asking me to step out of?

Day 5 – Christ in You, the Hope of Glory

Primary Scripture: Colossians 1:24–29

Alternate Scripture: Galatians 2:20

Meditation prompts:

What does it mean that Christ lives in me?

Where do I resist letting Him take root in me?

How is He calling me to carry His presence into the world?

Day 6 – Review, Rest, or Return

Choose one of the Scriptures that moved you this week.

Suggested: Luke 2:8–20 or Proverbs 4:20–27

What part of the mystery of the Incarnation do I feel most drawn to? Where is Christ asking to be born in me?

✠ “Fall on your knees; O hear the angel voices! O night divine, O night when Christ was born.” — Placide Cappeau

■ “To become a child in relation to God is the condition for entering the kingdom.” — CCC 526

Day 7 – Sunday Liturgy and Examen

Attend Mass and make time for a 15 minute Examen

What do I bring to the manger? What gift do I offer the Christ Child tonight? Do I believe — truly — that He came for me?

Final Meditation: Love Responds to Love

“Love ought to manifest itself more by deeds than by words.”

— St. Ignatius of Loyola, Spiritual Exercises, #230

As your Advent retreat comes to a close, you are not simply stepping away from prayer...

What has the Lord done for me in these four weeks?

What graces did I receive, even if I didn't feel them in the moment?

Where did I resist, and where did I say yes?

What is Christ now asking of me — what response does love desire?

Ignatius teaches that love is shown in action...

Closing Prayer

Take, Lord, and receive

all my liberty,

my memory,

my understanding,

and my entire will —

all that I have and possess.

You have given all to me.

To you, Lord, I return it.

Everything is yours; do with it what you will.

Give me only your love and your grace;

that is enough for me.

— Suscipe, St. Ignatius of Loyola