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Six Ways to Keep Your Advent Season Holy, Part II **Elizabeth Ficocelli**

Hi, welcome back! I'm Elizabeth Ficocelli Catholic author, speaker and radio host. This is part two of my presentation, "Six Tips to Keep Your Advent Season Holy". Let's begin again with a prayer.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Lord, we thank You and praise You for the season of Advent.

And we ask You to help us to experience this Advent in a deeper, more profound way than we've ever experienced it. Help us to push away the temptations to be swept up in materialism or secularism and all the distractions of this very busy time of year.

So that we can place ourselves, as Martha did, at Your feet to just be in Your presence, to just be rejuvenated interiorly so we can be strengthened to go out as husbands, wives, as disciples to do the work that You've set us to do on this Earth.

And we ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Welcome back and in the first presentation we began our discussion on six ways to keep your Advent season holy.

We talked about "A" for "Adoration" of the Blessed Sacrament. We talked about "D" the "Divine Word". We talked about "V" the Virgin Mary and how to bring her deeper into our spiritual walk.

So, the next letter in Advent is the letter "E" and the letter "E" stands for "Examination of Conscience".

Advent is a perfect season, a great season for searching our souls for kind of getting reflective on where we are or how we're doing in our life or where we can do better.

In the Early Church, Advent used to be referred to as a, "little Lent". Okay, there was a great deal of emphasis on penance and conversion and doing acts of

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reparation for our sinful nature. I think we kind of moved away from that in more modern times.

But I think there's a great value in maintaining a state of desire to do penance, to do reparation to really look at ourselves and say, "Where do I need to make my paths straight?" as John the Baptist asked us to do as he was preparing us for the coming of Jesus.

You know, we are a sinful humanity. We are in great need of a savior. And I think Advent provides us with an opportunity to be reflective. And as Catholics we have this great gift. It's called the Sacrament of Reconciliation (or confession) where we can really unburden ourselves and begin again anew.

And as much as I have this great passion for this sacrament, I've come to understand that this is a sacrament that for a lot of Catholics is so misunderstood, so under utilized and it's a great shame because there is so much wonderful benefit (and we're going to talk about that in this part of the presentation).

But I was trying to set out to find out why. Why is this sacrament so under utilized when it has so many great benefits? And I began to come up with a few reasons after talking to a lot of people.

First of all, we have to look at the culture that we are existing in right now. We have a culture that tells us there's no right or wrong. There's no absolute truth. But we have this moral relativism where everyone's private truth is the truth. And because of that, why would people go to confession? Because they can justify anything they do and there's really no right or wrong in the minds of the culture. That's a very pervasive mentality that seeps into even the lives of us Catholics.

I think among Catholics there's a confusion over sin. I think we need to get back to some basic catechesis on what is a mortal sin, what's a venial sin? You know, something as simple as missing mass without a valid reason is a mortal sin. But I think it's something that I think we need to hear a little bit more from the pulpits and just a little more catechesis. So, again, if people aren't aware of sin and what constitutes sin they're not going to feel a need to go to confession.

I think another thing that keeps people away from the sacrament of Reconciliation is maybe feelings of anxiety and shame and guilt over things we've done wrong because it's difficult to talk about those and admit those and that can keep people away.

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Sometimes people have a lack of trust in the confessor, in the priest themselves. Maybe they had a bad experience with a priest once. Maybe he gave them bad advice and they never returned to the sacrament. Sometimes they never return to the church (I've talked to people in that situation). So, that can keep them away from confession.

Maybe they are stuck in feelings of unforgiveness. Where they think that whatever they did in the past was so terrible that God would never forgive them and they judge themselves. They play God and they keep themselves away from God's mercy and His love and His desire to set them on a new path.

Sometimes Catholics, even Catholics, get stuck on this: Why do we need a priest? Why can't I just talk to God in my heart? Why do I have to go to confession to do it? Doesn't God know me?

Well the reason we go to a priest is, you know, God is very wise and He knew that we are not always the best judges of ourselves that we can be fooled by ourselves, we can be not very objective and so we need someone who has our best spiritual interest in mind. On the outside, who can help us and course correct us when we're going astray.

And so, Jesus breathed on the Apostles and He gave those first Apostles the power to loose and bind sins and they passed that on by the laying of hands on the priests that we have today. And you know, one other reason why we have that priest is when we sin we often understand that we turn our backs on or walk away from God. Right?

But we also turn our backs on the community our sin affects all of those in the church community because we're all the body of Christ so our good and our bad affects everybody else. It's the priest in the collar who is reconciling us back, not just to God in that confession but to the church community itself.

So we really need this sacrament but because there's all this negative feeling about confession out there, what's I've come to do is try to combat that by focusing on the gift that I see reconciliation is. And I kind of call it a two-fold gift.

The first part of the gift is God's forgiveness. That's an amazing gift because God's forgiveness, unlike human forgiveness, is unconditional. If we go to confession and we are really sorry and we want to do better. He is going to give us

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complete unconditional forgiveness. Complete washing clean. Complete clean slate, ultimate do-over. He's not going to hang onto it. He's going to let it go and He's asking us to also. So, wonderful forgiveness. We cannot get that kind of forgiveness in all our earthly relationships can we?

The other gift we get by going to confession is the gift of grace. Grace is powerful. Grace begins to work before we even begin our confession. Before we step foot in that confessional it's that grace that gets us there in the first place. That recognition that I need to get to confession and talk to a priest about this. So, that's one of the graces.

Another grace is when we go to confession regularly we begin to see ourselves a little bit better, maybe how God is seeing us. We do gain a little bit more objectivity in our lives. What are our attitudes behind our actions and how do we correct that so we can correct our behaviors as well?

We get the grace of being wiser against our temptations, you know, recognizing what our temptations really are. And we actually get fortitude by going to confession. And we get stronger each time. It doesn't mean we're never going to sin again. We are fallen humanity but we do literally become strengthened and stronger against those temptations.

And I think the other grace that we get by going to confession regularly is we become more loving and more merciful to ourselves which is very important but also to others because we're experiencing God's love and mercy on a regular basis. So it kind of channels out through us.

Another benefit though, there's more benefits than this, if we go to confession on a regular basis and we hear those words of the priest who knows us, who is in relationship with us we get we get kind of what's like spiritual counseling or even like spiritual direction. Because he knows us and he's able to say, "Elizabeth if you go down that road you know what's going to happen because it's happened in the past and he plays that role of important words of wisdom that we need to hear regularly to keep us on the path to holiness. So if forms, like I said, spiritual guidance or spiritual direction.

And yet there's another even more amazing gift to the sacrament of reconciliation, probably the least benefit that is known to people, and that is it's tremendous power against evil. I learned that through a priest that recently passed away, Fr.

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Gabriel Amorth. He was the official exorcist of Rome for decades. He performed thousands of exorcisms.

In one of his books that he wrote he talked about confession. And listen to this! He said, “A good heartfelt confession where we are really sorry for our sins and want to do better has more power over evil than a full-fledged Roman exorcism”. And I stopped to myself and said when you think about a billion Catholics all over the globe and how few are really using this sacrament regularly. If we all used this sacrament regularly and tapped into that grace, that power over evil worldwide (wow!) we’d have a different world overnight. I truly believe that.

Now, I’m talking about confession and you’re probably thinking “Wow! This girl is really on fire about this sacrament!”. But I’m going to share something with you, this was not the case for me. [During] my first 10 years of Catholicism, this was the biggest obstacle for me. I never got this. I went but I didn’t get what was going on. I didn’t understand that this was a sacrament, an encounter with the living Christ himself.

All I could see was a miserable foot-dragging experience to go into that little dark closet with that man with the collar around his neck and having to tell him humiliating things. You know, I didn’t even go to my own pastor for confession. I went to a church on the other side of town to a priest that didn’t know me because I thought if my pastor knew how bad I was, how sinful I was he wouldn’t like me anymore. I thought maybe he was telling other priests about me, you know, or other people about me and I didn’t understand the seal of confidentiality that goes on in the sacrament of confession.

I just didn’t get it. I never felt better. You know? I’d always beat myself up. I never felt better.

And then one day it was in the mid-90’s. God performed this tremendous miracle. He had brought Faustina and the Divine Mercy into my life and it was after making a very difficult confession (I had done something I was really humiliated about and so sorry about) that He gave me a tangible, tangible experience of His forgiveness.

It was not in the confession itself but as I was exiting the confessional (still feeling terrible) when I felt this washing clean feeling. That ocean of mercy being poured out on me like Jesus had told Faustina he had wished to pour out His ocean of mercy on us sinners. And it transformed me! It brought me such a feeling of instant lightness and joy that I suddenly understood this is what confession was all about.

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This is what God's mercy is all about and He wanted me to experience this because He was eventually going to want me to speak about it and write about it, which I have many times. And people have told me after that they've come back to the sacrament after 10, 20, 30 even 40 years of being away because now they get it.

So my tip for you "E" [for] "Examination of Conscience". Search your soul this Advent and make that confession. Remember that it is Jesus with His arms open, ready to take you back, don't hold back anything. Put it all at the feet of Jesus. It will give you such a sense of peace and joy this Advent season.

The next letter in Advent is "N" and "N" stands for "Neighborly Love".

Advent is a beautiful season that I think makes everybody a little more charitable, a little bit more aware of those around us, the more needy around us. Don't you notice that even secular people, non-believers become more charitable at this time of year?

And I think there is something that we can build on there but when we think about Jesus 2,000 years ago what he said to his followers is that you could take all those 10 Commandments and really summarize them in the first two. Which is love God. Always love God first. But the second one? To love one another; to be neighborly to one another.

So what Jesus was telling his disciples and to us today is he wants us to be his hands, his feet, his heart here on the Earth. We need to be His Presence on the Earth. So, we can be watching out and taking care of the needy, the poor, the sick, the elderly, the orphaned, the widowed, all those on the fringes of society that He would reach out to if He were walking around like He did 2,000 years ago.

So, we're being called to be neighborly in the season of Advent and our Church (I love our Church) gives us this beautiful blueprint or recipe for how to be neighborly and it's called the Works of Mercy. And we just came off the year of Mercy so it's a beautiful time for us to really employ this truthfully in our lives.

There are corporal works of mercy and those are things like feeding the hungry and giving drink to the thirsty and clothing the naked and sheltering the homeless and comforting the dying and visiting the sick and burying the dead. And sometimes people say, "Well, I'm older now and I'm in a state of life where I can't do that anymore".

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Well, here are some things called the spiritual works of mercy. We can do these in a hospital bed or in our home if we are shut in and they are things like teaching the ignorant and praying for the living and the dead and correcting sinners and counseling those in doubt, (I have a list here) comforting the sorrowful and bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving wrongs willingly. I don't have those memorized yet. But the point is that these exist and these are great ways to be living out the works of mercy.

But, you know, the works of mercy are not things that we're just supposed to do because they are nice things to do. Jesus tells us. He makes no bones about it. This is our pathway to Heaven. Right? He separates the goats and the sheep when he talks about that in the Gospels and he says, "Because you fed me when I was hungry and you clothed me when I was naked". And the people said, "Lord when did we do that for you?". He said, "When you do it for the least of my people you do it for me.". So, this is how we earn our salvation, our eternal destination of Heaven, is by being neighborly to one another.

So, this Advent I invite you to look around and say "How can I be more neighborly?". Where can I give of myself? And I know when I found that, for instance, when I make a meal for a new mom or that person who is having surgery. Just a little act of neighborliness it actually gives me more energy. It's that good feeling that I have love for someone else. Don't get overwhelmed. You know you can definitely get out of balance. You don't need to be so neighborly that you are neglecting your own family, your own vocation, your mission or whatever God's calling you to. But look for opportunities this Advent to be more neighborly.

The last letter of Advent is "T" and "T" is for "Traditions".

Traditions are a wonderful thing. They give us a sense of identity, a sense of belonging to a community and to community faith. And Advent has lots of amazing traditions that we can incorporate. I'm going to go through a list of them and, you know, maybe some of them you're doing now or you might wish to incorporate. Just a word of caution, don't take on too many at once because you'll get overwhelmed and you won't complete them and you'll feel bad about yourself. But maybe one or two of these, if you're not doing them already might be a beautiful way to just keep that reminder of I am in this very special liturgical season, a season all it's own, a season called Advent and I want to try to keep it holy for myself and for my family.

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The first tradition is the Advent wreath. I love this. You know, the Advent wreath is so full of symbolism. The round wreath shape is symbolic of God's love. It has no beginning and no end, it's just perpetual. It's eternal.

The green boughs of the Advent wreath symbolize life even in the stark winter those evergreen boughs are green. Proving that life exists even in death, darkness, in the seasons of winter and that's true in our lives.

The four candles mark the four weeks of Advent. Three of them are purple. One of them is pink. That pink one is lit in the third week of Advent as a sign that we are more than halfway there. You know, Christmas is coming! The incarnation of the Word is coming to us and we are filled with joy. That's a special pink candle.

The flames of the candle represents Christ's light in the darkness. And so, get your Advent wreath and put it in a central place. Ours is on our kitchen table. Bless it with holy water and gather around there daily. When you pray, when you eat light that candle and talk about God. Just join yourself to God in the Advent season through that Advent wreath.

Another tradition I love is the Jesse Tree. And this is essentially a family tree of Jesus. So, you pick a separate tree of it's own and there are ornaments for every day from December 1st through December 25th. You can even purchase a Jesse Tree kit online or you can make these ornaments yourself. But there are specific Biblical stories that are either actual ancestors in the lineage of Jesus or stories from the Old Testament that foreshadow the coming of the Lord. [It is a] beautiful way to countdown the days to Christmas and learn a whole bunch of Bible at the same time with your children.

Another tradition or way to countdown the Advent season is the Advent calendar. This is also wonderful but I would encourage you to get one with a spiritual theme. A nativity scene versus Santa and the reindeers. And if the doors open, maybe instead of just candy in there but if there's some word of scripture or a message that reminds us that Jesus is coming. It's a great way also to countdown the days to Christmas.

There's a feast day, saint's feast day, during the weeks of Advent. I'm a big fan of saints and it's St. Nicholas Day. It happens on December 6th. And you know, the secular culture has hijacked the figure of St. Nicholas and turned him into the Santa Clause that we all see in the cartoons and the shopping malls. But, St.

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Nicholas was a real person. He is a saint. He was the Bishop of Myra and extreme generosity is what he's known for.

At least the spirit of generosity has stayed but, you know, obviously the character has been changed. We've celebrated this feast day, put the shoes out and the kids get a little treat but they learn about a saint so whenever I can incorporate saints into our Catholic family life I do that. So, I invite you to think about incorporating that tradition in your Advent.

Purple decorations, another great tradition that don't have to be reserved for the Church. Fill your home with purple decorations. We have a little miniature Christmas tree that just purple the whole season and that's our Advent tree. But I know people who decorate their main Christmas tree with purple decorations all season until Christmas Eve and they change those out for Christmas decorations. Just purple candles, flowers and decorations in your home, again, is that visual reminder that we are in a special season called Advent.

Another beautiful and very simple tradition are the candles in the windows. And that tradition stemmed back centuries ago and it was symbolically saying to Mary and Joseph as they traveled that night to Bethlehem that yes, there's room in our inn. In our homes, our families, our hearts for the coming of the Lord. A beautiful very simple tradition of the candles in the window.

Nativity scenes are very popular. People put them up early and maybe reserve the body of the baby out of the crib until Christmas Eve or Christmas morning. We have at our house a manger set outside and a couple inside.

But we also have this tradition and it's called "Hay in the Manger". And I found a little wooden crib and I put it out on the kitchen counter and next to it a jar or bowl of hay. The tradition always was with our children any time any of us in the family did something good we would put a little hay in the manger. And we were trying to build up a bed for the little baby Jesus.

As the kids got older we added a twist to it and we said that any time that you did something that wasn't so good you had to take a little hay out of the manger. But the idea was that as a family we were all working to be kind and gentle and loving and compassionate so that we would put together this warm, inviting bed for the baby Jesus to lay down in.

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So, those are my tips. “A-D-V-E-N-T” for Adoration, Divine Word, Virgin Mary, Examination of Conscience, Neighborly Love and Traditions.

So, again, don't overwhelm yourself you know, getting too much at one time. But I hope that these tips will help make your season holy, to find just that sacred sense of peace, sense of rejuvenation and just being right with the Lord. And I will pray for your Advent season and I hope you'll pray for mine as well.

So, let's end with a prayer.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And Lord we thank You again for the season of Advent. We thank You for the sacrament of Reconciliation, a way that we can really unburden ourselves and just put everything at the foot of Your cross and know that You will take those sins from us and make us new creations.

We thank you for opportunities to be people of neighborly love to look out to those whom you've entrusted us with in the greater community and we can be Your hearts and minds and direct us to whom You would like us to help this particular Advent season.

And may we incorporate traditions in our home, in our family living, in our domestic churches to remind ourselves of this very special season that You have set aside for us that we may prepare ourselves for Your coming. For Your coming 2,000 years ago, for Your coming in the future and for Your coming in the day to day basis in our lives.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

And again, have a blessed Advent season. Thanks for listening.