



## Nurturing Faith at Home - *The Family Altar or Prayer Table*

December marks the beginning of the four-week Advent season. It is also the beginning of the liturgical or Church year. At this time, we delve into many preparations such as gift shopping, home decorating, and baking. While these activities are important to physically prepare for our Christmas celebrations, it is equally important to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's birth and His Second Coming. Prayer and reflection, alone and with our families, are necessary for this spiritual work. Advent is a time for making new habits of prayer that will carry on throughout the year. The following is a recommended project for your family during Advent. Why not give it serious consideration?

A prayer table, or family altar as some call it, helps not only to maintain a family habit of prayer, but serves as a physical reminder that our home is a sacred place – a 'holy ground', because God is present. This is the whole idea of the 'domestic Church': that we worship God ... in our homes ... as a family. A family altar or prayer table provides an appropriate place and helps us to do that.

A prayer table need not be anything elaborate, fancy or expensive. If the home is full of small inquisitive children with busy fingers, it need not even be a table-style altar. What is essential is that it be an easily visible spot where the family gathers for prayers. A small table in a corner (perhaps where the TV used to sit), a space on top of a low bookcase, or a mantle piece will all work well.

The family altar should include a few items to show that it is a special place for prayer. A cloth covering, either embroidered or in the liturgical color of the season, gives the family altar a certain formality. (Purple or violet reflects the repentance of Advent and Lent. White expresses the joy and purity of Christmas and Easter. Green is the color of Ordinary Time.)

A variety of religious objects can then be arranged on the prayer table, all reminding us of our faith. A crucifix and small statues of favorite saints, along with votive lights or candles, which remind us that Jesus is the 'Light of the World'.

A Bible is an important addition. Books of prayers, bible stories, or daily devotions could also be kept at the family altar. Icons or pictures, including a family photo or a picture of Jesus, can be placed in stands or hung on the wall behind the family altar. Like the crucifix and statues, icons and pictures give focus to our meditations and devotions.

The family altar is also a good place to keep the family's rosaries, rather than having them spread all over the house. (Your child may have been learning how to pray the rosary at school, as October is the month of the rosary and May is the month of Mary.)

### Advent Wreath

As we begin the Advent season it is very appropriate to place an Advent wreath on the prayer table. Setting up an Advent wreath in your home is a 500 year-old tradition. The circular shape of the wreath reminds us of God, Who has no beginning or end. The evergreens symbolize His everlasting love for us, and green is a color of hope. There are four candles, one for each week of Advent. Three are violet, the color of repentance – of turning back to God, while the fourth candle is pink, symbolizing the anticipation and joy we feel during the third week of Advent as Christmas nears. Some wreaths have a white candle in the center, which is lit on Christmas Day. The white candle represents purity.

### An Advent Calendar

Kids enjoy the excitement of waiting. An Advent calendar (not necessarily the kind with chocolates behind every door, but one that helps tell the Christmas story) can keep your children focused on the great event – Jesus' birth – that we will celebrate.

### A Nativity Scene

The prayer table is also a place for the nativity set, at least until the family Christmas tree is set up. The Nativity set reminds everyone that Jesus is the reason for the season. Kids enjoy the figurines they can manipulate and touch. To build anticipation, a few figures can be set out each week, starting with the shepherds and animals, followed by Mary and Joseph, but leave the manger empty until Christmas Day. A poinsettia, Christmas cactus or other houseplant can be added to symbolize the beauty of God's creation.

Creating and maintaining a family altar is a simple activity: one that will make a difference to the prayer life of your family and to the atmosphere of your home. Your own children will want to make contributions to the prayer table as well, whether it is a handcrafted cross or a prayer card they have created.

*The family that prays together stays together.*