



The retail world is always two steps ahead of every major holiday, but my question is this: What are we doing to prepare spiritually for the intense holiday season ahead?

Here are some ways that can work very well — it's all about keeping God uppermost in our minds.

Preparation well in advance. Last month I completed the marathon in Hartford, Connecticut, and my official training began 10 weeks before it. I knew race day would arrive quickly — so I committed to a realistic and structured training plan, and yes, I was good to go when the race began at 8 a.m. in mid-October.

Similarly, I suggest trying to build into your daily grind a simple but structured prayer schedule. Begin your day with a little Jesus time, crack open the Bible, perhaps go through the day ahead — and invite Him to accompany you. Pray a decade of the rosary — something to get your spiritual engines moving.

At the end of the day, look back and see what God was trying to teach you, and how He was trying to love you. **The important thing is to begin and end the day with God — remembering He wants to be a part of it, fully in the mix, and not on the sidelines.**

Specific spiritual preparation. **Begin a gratitude journal if you haven't already.** Count your blessings each day — and try to develop an “attitude of gratitude” before the big day arrives. A month before Christmas, purchase an Advent wreath kit and follow the rhythm of the season by lighting one candle per week and reading the appropriate Scriptural passages for each day.

You could also set out a Nativity scene — and reward your children with pieces of straw for the manger based on their good deeds, so that the baby Jesus has a soft and comfortable landing when He arrives on December 25. These little habits will help create the right climate in your soul so the days before Christmas are not overshadowed by the noise and chaos of shopping and parties.

Immediate preparation. Most of us get together with extended family — and unfortunately for many, this will often be a difficult time, given the complicated history and emotional pains of the past. Pray for those more difficult members of your family each day a week

before the event, asking the Lord to soften their hearts and your heart. It is difficult to hate or dislike someone for whom you have prayed! But do not allow the devil to take away your peace by thinking too much about these brief encounters ahead. They will come and go — but you should not be torturing yourself by obsessing about it for weeks ahead of time.

We all know the intensity of these weeks that lie ahead. Buy your presents, cook your special meals, decorate your house, send out the dinner and party invitations — but do not lose your peace! Pull back, make space to pray, and prepare your heart and mind for the reason behind each season. More than a perfectly decorated house and a perfectly prepared gourmet meal, your family and friends most need to feel and experience the peace and love of Jesus that you carry in your hearts. Make time for Him to fill you with His love.