

“Think Tank”



Commentaries

by

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2017

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We're living in a digital age, and future priests must be formed in it (8/7/17)

St. Francis de Sales once claimed that “knowledge is the eighth sacrament for the hierarchy of the church.” In context, he was not seeking to alter long-standing church tradition. Instead, he was indicating the need for more and better theological education since, in his view, a significant factor in the defection of Catholics from their faith was the clergy’s uninspiring, and at time erroneous, teaching.

In the twenty-first century Church, the need for knowledge remains paramount for priests, present and future. This month, as students head back to school, seminarians will also begin or continue their journey toward ordination. What do they need to know to bolster belief in our times?

Like anyone, they need to master the basics of how to read, write and speak. More deeply, they must learn how to think and how to know God by studying philosophy and theology. More broadly, they should learn the ways of the world, in science and in business. More specifically, they need to master their own tools of the trade, in the work of liturgical worship and apostolic ministry.

But in a seminary, the goal of learning is not simply education, but formation. In addition to intellectual matters, future priests are schooled in ways human, spiritual and pastoral, enabling them to develop maturity, a life of prayer and a commitment to service. According to a recent Vatican guide on “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation,” these four dimensions of seminary education aim at “transforming” or “assimilating” the hearts of men “in the image of the heart of Christ.”

This integrated approach to priestly formation faces a steep challenge, since seminarians come to their schooling already formed, in many ways unconsciously so. Whether in nuclear, blended, or broken families, their vocation was incubated at home. Whether through popular devotions or charismatic conferences or service trips, their vocation has been nurtured in a particular experience of faith. Whether conservative or liberal, traditional or progressive, their conceptualization of “church” and “priest” is shaped by larger cultural forces at work all around them.

Of these, perhaps none holds more sway than the digital environment in and through which life takes place today. Especially for this “native” generation, technology exercises a defining influence on how they think and act, and consequently on how they believe and will minister in the church. The Vatican’s new guide acknowledges this realm as something “from which the pastors of the future cannot remain aloof” (no. 97). “The church,” it says, “looks confidently at the possibilities offered by the digital world for evangelization” (no. 98). The document also reminds seminarians “to pay prudent attention to the inevitable risks that come with frequenting the digital world” (no. 99).

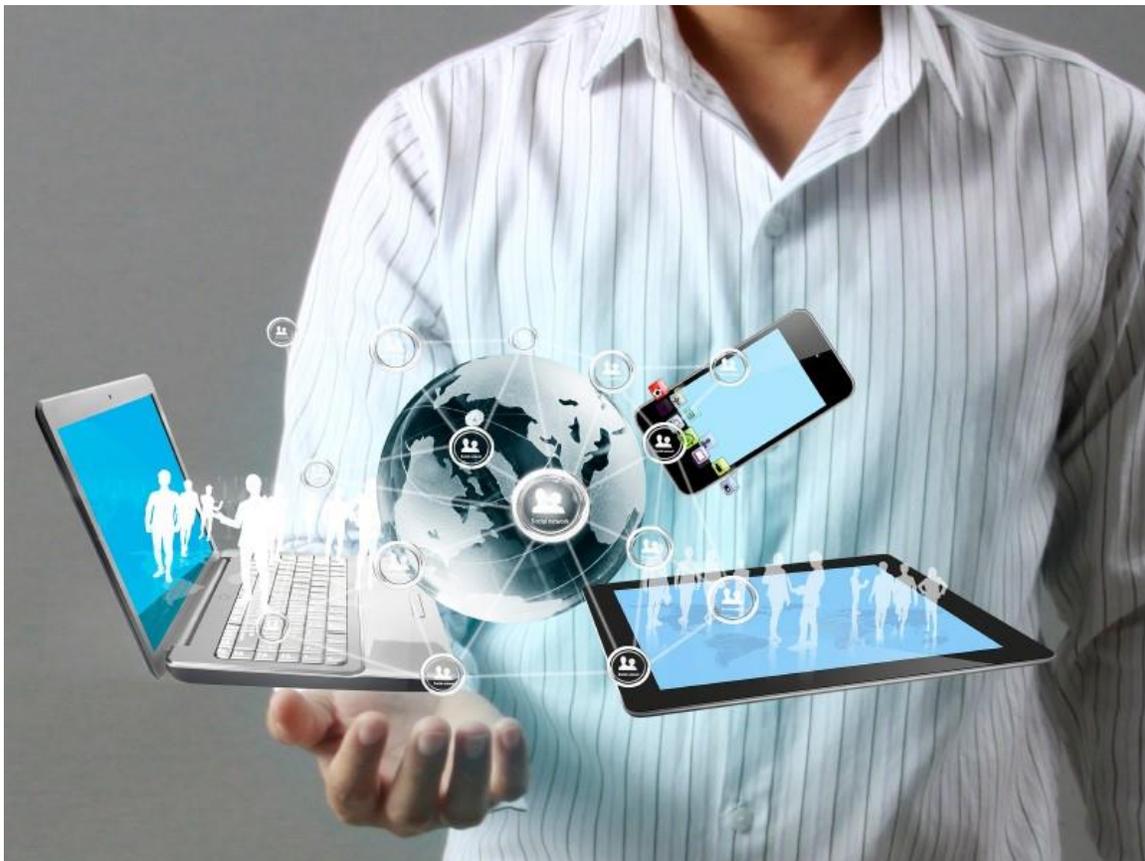
But cultivating a “sacramental” knowledge in the world of mass media and social networks demands a larger perspective than the one sketched in the guide. It calls for a more profound “thinkability of the faith in the light of the logic of the web,” according to Jesuit Father Antonio Spadaro. In that enlightened logic, the internet is not just a place to go to during free time, or even during class (if permitted to do so). The digital world has exploded such notions of time and place. Nor is digital technology simply a powerful tool in their pastoral pocket which seminarians need to learn to use religiously. With or without their devices at hand, the reality of digital life is always “on.”

Online is where we get our information and pay our bills. There we express our thoughts, convey our hopes, and share our views in words and images. The digital realm offers a repository of data at our fingertips and a link to others near and far. Thanks to the power of apps, it also facilitates reading Scripture, praying the liturgical hours, viewing faraway liturgical ceremonies, going on a pilgrimage while staying in place and even making donations to the parish.

Like others their age, seminarians have grown up accustomed to digital technology. To be well-formed in their priestly vocation, they need to learn balance, not by turning off their use of devices, but by simultaneously appreciating the power of silence, in order to remain ever in dialogue with the One who calls them to this vocation.

Then, we hope, they will better positioned to encounter others, on- and off-line, so as to engage them even now with the joyful message of salvation that will be theirs to proclaim one day as priests.

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A “LITTLE” VIRTUE TO APPEASE AN ANGRY WORLD

(9/1/17)

A close friend of mine proudly describes the Philly neighborhood where he grew up as a place “where the men are men, and so are the women!” Lest anyone misunderstand, he’s not a chauvinist. He’s not commenting on transgenderism. He means no insult nor to demean his peers. In fact, ladies from the same ‘hood tend to agree with him!

His sardonic saying characterizes the locale of his upbringing as a tough place. Life on those streets demands a mixture of brawn and brains, of strength and savvy. When necessary, local law is enforced with fists. To thrive there, everyone has to “be a man.”

That expression suggests that manly men are the strong ones, that virility exudes toughness. It’s not a big leap from this image to the belief that “to the victor go the spoils.”

That conception undergirds the alt- and anti- movements making news these days. The stories and images portray the force of anger inciting the masses, coaxing into public expression an impulse to vengeance.

Recently, Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia identified this as our American “[epidemic](#).” He claims we are “addicted” to it because we’ve learned “to like being angry.” He adds that “we’re relentlessly reinforced in it by mass media that compulsively feed our emotions and starve our reason.”

Admittedly, anger is not a new illness. But curing this epidemic does require something new – a reconceptualization of what it means to be a manly man. To counter the anger rampant in society, we need men (and women) who know, and live, the virtue of meekness.

Virtue has its etymological roots in notions of force, strength, and vigor long associated with men (from the Latin “vir” meaning man). But meekness hardly comes off as manly in a world of pronounced conflict.

Enter St. Francis de Sales, with his insight that “nothing is so strong as gentleness, nothing so gentle as real strength.”

This saint knew anger up-close. The subject of numerous insults and calumnies, he confesses being prone to anger and struggling mightily to keep it in check. His natural proclivity likely inspired his adamant advice in the *Introduction to the Devout Life* to “not be angry at all, if that is possible, and (to) not accept any pretext whatsoever to open the door of your heart to wrath.”

We would consider that possibility to be slim, at best. He then reminds us of what we know from experience: “when reason prevails and peaceably administers punishment, correction, and reproof (even though it is done strictly and precisely) everyone likes it and approves of it, but when reason comes with anger, wrath and rage ... it makes itself more feared than loved and even reason’s own heart is trampled and abused.”

Power promotes fear; fear produces resentment. Once embraced, resentful anger “is converted into hatred,” says the saint, “and there is no way to get rid of it, because it feeds on a thousand false excuses, so no angry person ever thought his anger unfair.” Or, as Archbishop Chaput puts it, “Wrath

feels good, especially when the ugliness of the habit can be dressed in a struggle against real or perceived evils.”

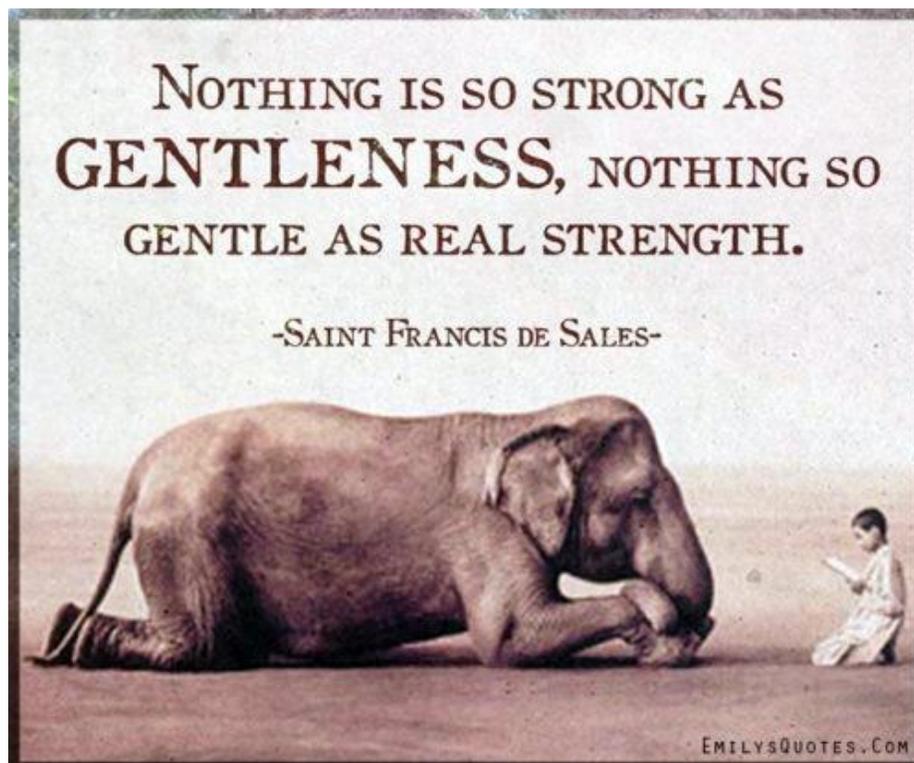
To remedy this, de Sales counsels meekness or gentleness (“douceur”). Far from a softness that the English words convey, this virtue is not at all wishy-washy. It requires the strength to intentionally respond to others not out of emotion but from the reasoning that they are like us – imperfect yet worthy, having personal flaws yet also possessing inherent dignity. The same holds true for groups and governments. We, the people, are all alike when it comes to being human.

Being nice, being kind, being gracious – it sounds sappy and appears slight in response to the violent protests that have engulfed our society. Can harm on such a grand scale be countered by such a “little” virtue?

Perhaps we first need to try it. Pointing fingers, shouting accusations, and raising torches or clubs does nothing to lessen the indignation or calm the fracas. Long before we reach that level, the virtue of gentleness offers an antidote which can be administered at home, in school, and around the neighborhood. As the archbishop says, “It should start with us.”

And if what the saint says elsewhere is true – “it takes more oil than vinegar to make a good salad!” – then maybe it also takes more meekness than toughness to make good men, and women too.

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"WE ARE FAMILY" IN THE CHURCH (10-6-17)

They're much too young to have known the prodigious Pirates of Pittsburgh baseball lore. But they sure sound like they '79 World Series champions.

Youth from around the world recently gathered at the Vatican to prepare for the [October 2018 Synod of Bishops](#) on "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment." ("Young people" in Vatican-speak refers more to those of university-age than to teenagers.) Concluding their get-together with a [Facebook video](#), the digital natives adopted the slogan: "We are family; let's listen and grown together."



According to a [press release](#), the seminar disclosed "the desire of young people to find in the Church a *home*, a *family* and a *community* where they can develop their life choices and contribute to the common good." All of us in the iWorld share that longing, but their vantage point differs.

For this hyper-connected generation, the experience of life is technologically-mediated. According to the Synod's [preparatory document](#), this digital phenomenon gives young people a distinct "conception of the world, reality and interpersonal relationships." Consequently, the Synod seeks to develop a pastoral activity appropriate to that experience.

For the younger generation, the "world" has become quite small. Cyberspace seems vast, but the world within it is governed by minute data – bits and bytes of information gathered from activity online and fed with algorithmic precision into every aspect of a young person's life. Meeting new people, navigating trips, receiving news, and shopping for just about anything is all technologically mediated. The world is literally at their fingertips, by way of a hand-held or wrist-worn device.

Pastorally speaking, the challenge will be to get young people to look up from those devices! They may navigate the world with a point and click, but finding meaning there, especially amid so much chaos and conflict, doesn't happen in the 0.34 seconds it takes Google to respond to a query. For that, the Church proclaims the Good News of the Gospel. Through encounters with believers who give witness to [mercy](#) and [hope](#) online and in-person, young people can experience the world in a new light.

For today's youth, "reality" has become something virtual. It's still real, of course, but increasingly it comes to be filtered through technology. For the digital generation, "*carpe diem*" translates into taking a photo or video of what's happening. Geo-localization tags where they are. Instagram shows what they're eating. YouTube records the concert they're attending. Reality is not simply to be enjoyed "in the moment." Young people prefer to capture it and desire so share it.

The challenge for pastoral outreach to this generation will be to break through the filters. They may increasingly digitize their experiences, but experience framed by a lens is necessarily limited, despite continual improvements to digital cameras. The Church offers more, by way of a sacramental approach to reality. Through this, young people can learn to appreciate mystery, to ponder the

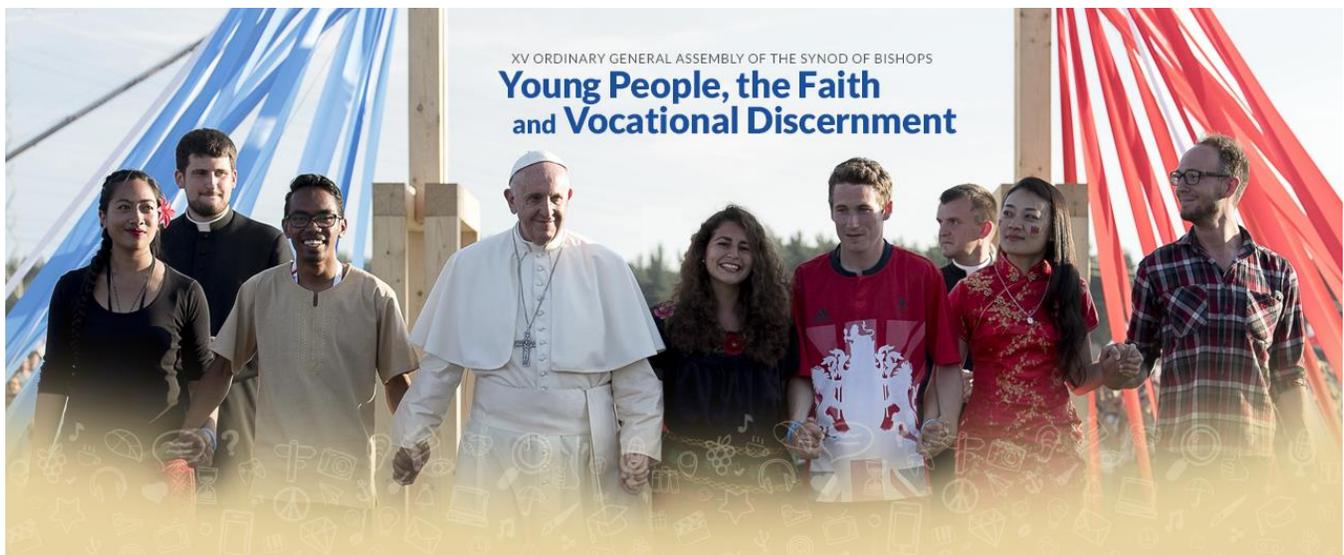
supernatural, and to experience the beauty of the sacred as it breaks forth in and through their daily lives.

For young people, "interpersonal relations" have become networked. They still socialize, but do so through screens rather than face-to-face. They prefer texts to lengthy conversation, posts to interactive engagement, and tweets to sustained discourse. As the MIT psychologist [Sherry Turkle](#) describes it, youth exist "alone together" in social networks, thanks to which they can be in touch with a lot more people, while also keeping all of them carefully at bay.

Ultimately, pastoral work aims to provide a relational experience of eternal communion. Young people today may be linked in to hundreds or thousands of followers; but what they desire, as has every generation before them, is real friendship. The Church offers this, not by way of technological mediation but through the person of Jesus Christ. By reclaiming conversation with Him, mediated through the Sacred Scriptures and prayer and worship, young people can develop a lasting relationship with God and others that alone will give them the joy they so earnestly seek.

Theologically, the Church continues to stress an incarnational, sacramental, and liturgical approach to human life. Our collective challenge, at and beyond the next Synod, is to figure out how best to communicate that to a generation whose experience of life is technologically mediated. To meet this challenge, we most definitely need to ["listen and grow together"](#) with the young people in our Church family.

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<http://www.synod2018.va/content/synod2018/en.html>

EUCCHARISTIC ADORATION EXPRESSES SIMPLICITY ON THE FAR SIDE OF COMPLEXITY (11-3-17)

In a talk at the headquarters of Facebook, Bishop Robert Barron explained "[how to have a religious argument.](#)" He began by postulating that such debate, online or offline, works only when founded on the truth that faith is not opposed to reason. That principle has long been a staple of Catholic theology and was thoroughly elucidated in St. John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, a tour-de-force of magisterial teaching that, when understood, saves modern philosophical thinking from imploding.



But the bishop made his point in simpler terms and with a catchy quote that caught the attention of those denizens of the post and comment domain. There in Silicon Valley, where life is governed through a labyrinth of logarithms, Barron quoted Oliver Wendell Holmes: "I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity. But I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

The bishop's point is that faith is not a simplistic alternative to, or abdication, of rational thinking. On the contrary, it represents a deliberate choice to trust in relation to the God who reveals Himself to human beings. Faith as a way of knowing entails not the verifiability of scientific proofs, nor the veracity of philosophical ideas, but the personal certitude that can only be known in and through a friendship. Without complexity, faith is simply adherence to some belief; with the complexity of grappling for a response to existential questions and personal anguish, faith becomes a simple trust in God as "the way, the truth, and the life."

More recently, in his [Erasmus Lecture](#), Bishop Barron expanded on this theme in terms of "evangelizing the nones" (i.e., those claiming to be spiritual without any religious affiliation). He concluded that talk with a call to engage this cohort – now 25% of the population – with a radical witness to the faith. For this, he recommends we re-visit and re-present the living treasures of the Church.

One of those treasures is Eucharistic Adoration. It may come as a surprise, but this devotional exercise holds a certain appeal for young adults.

Some attribute their interest to an outdated and unfounded nostalgia for the Church of old, others to a cult-like fascination with what is mysterious. But I think there's more to it.

For the under-30 generation, 40% of whom count among the "nones," the religious impulse has not disappeared altogether. They still hold core religious beliefs, even if they are not well-versed in them. They still seek meaning and purpose in life. They still ask the questions that have always compelled the human heart, as Saint John Paul II says: *Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?* For that philosopher-pope, "the answer given to these questions decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives" (*Fides et Ratio*, no. 1) – even, or especially, for young people.

Adoration can point the way. For this new media generation, answers to the questions they ask are socially shaped. What that means when it comes to religion is that their sense of the sacred goes beyond traditionally holy things (places, objects, etc.) to include their own subjective experience, which, of course, they like to "share" online.

Adoration shapes a combination of both. The traditional element comes with the smells 'n bells: the candle lit church, the fragrant incense, the ornamental monstrance, and memorable Latin hymns. These draw the human spirit by appealing to our innate wonder about the supernatural. We respond with Benediction.



But even with the liturgical rite, personal experience still holds sway. Whether in solitary prayer or lone wonder, adoration offers to seekers young and old an opportunity to be aware of a something (actually, a Someone) greater than the chaos of this world, while at the same time assuring them of a goodness (really, a divine Presence) that perdures in and beyond the challenges of their lives. To "behold Him who takes away the sins of the world" opens oneself to transformation.

Yes, Adoration is simple faith, of a kind that we could give a life for. For the faithful, it's sung at Christmas and prayed before the Cross and celebrated with a Holy Hour or a Forty Hours devotion. For the young, this living tradition may be one way that they, too, can believe, on the far side of their own complexities.

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Bishop Timothy Senior, and the community of
St. Charles Borromeo Seminary
invite you to

The Closing of Forty Hours

Friday, November 3, 2017

7:00pm

The evening will begin in
Immaculate Conception Chapel followed by
a procession to the Chapel of Saint Martin of Tours
for Vespers and Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament.

*"Jesus waits for us In the
Sacrament of Love.
Let us be generous in
going to meet Him
in adoration..."*

-St. Pope John Paul II

A wine and cheese reception will follow in the
College Auditorium.

'Tis the season – for becoming a sentinel.

Amid the hype of the holidays, the liturgical message that recurs at this time of year comes through in a single word: "Watch!"

With this imperative, Jesus exhorts his followers in the Gospel of Mark that is read on the first Sunday of Advent: "Watch, therefore; you do not know when the Lord of the house is coming ... What I say to you, I say to all: 'Watch!'" (Mark 13:37).

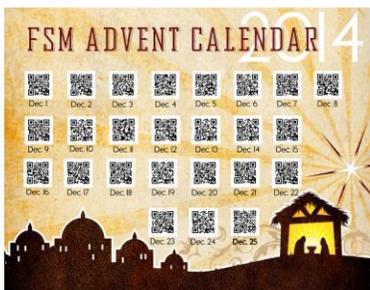
What He says is more than "wait and see" – as if simply having eyes wide open were enough. What He means is more than "pay attention" – as if only to avoid the element of surprise.

To watch is to look out for, to be vigilant in trying to see what (or who) is out there. Ask a Marine what it means to "keep watch" and you'll learn that it can be an arduous task, especially on post during a cold and dark winter's night.

The enemy of such watchfulness is ennui, that feeling of listlessness that comes from a lack of activity or excitement. It's a sleepiness that yawns upon us when nothing is happening. But it can also overtake us even when we're fully awake.

Minds get tired from the myriad of thoughts racing through them, so much so that we can't seem to focus. Hearts grow weary with anxious concern about loved ones and worries about things we cannot control. Souls can be fatigued, when the endless routines of life keep us in a rut and sap the joy of a new day.

"Watch!" says the Lord, for God knows that human nature is prone to drift off or drift away, that the ways of this world can darken the prospects of hope and turn cold the reasons for joy.



But Someone *is* coming. To be mindful of that is [what the Advent season beckons](#). And now we have special calendars to help us keep on track.

Advent calendars count the days of December in anticipation of Christmas. Crafty construction allows the user to open a "window" or a box each day to receive a gift. Digital designs use barcodes or push the daily delight to your device in the form of badges, banners, or other notifications.

[Religious versions](#) of these calendars traditionally include readings, prayers, or spiritual thoughts for each of the twenty-four days. Secular ones promote a [daily random act of kindness](#). Other versions now abound.

Children can [create and color](#) their own. Adults can pass the time by indulging in [a dram of whiskey a day](#). Capitalizing on the growing popularity of these calendars, all sorts of business are getting into the act with [online calendars to market various products](#).

But consumer countdowns miss the mark. They may build anticipation, and present gifts along the way, but they don't help us to keep watch. The dark chocolate ones may even make us sleepier.



To build vigilance during Advent, we should take a cue, instead, from positive psychology. In a TED talk viewed by more than 16 million people, Shawn Achor introduces the science to happiness. He shows that finding three new things to be thankful for each day for twenty-one straight days actually re-wires the way we think. [How?](#) "By actively finding ways to practice gratitude, joy and social connection, our brains will retain a pattern of scanning the world for the positive first rather than the negative."



In more biblical language, keeping watch or being on the lookout for the positive presence of the divine leads us to the joyful experience of seeing God in all things. It actively finds ways in which God comes into our world, as God once did in a stable in Bethlehem and will do again in glory with salvation for all who believe.

Advent can serve as our calendar for re-wiring our minds and hearts and souls. Mark these days with ways that you actively watch for and see God at work in your daily life. Write them down. Snap a photo on your phone. Share them with family and friends.

Become a sentinel of the supernatural in this season, and your Christmas will undoubtedly be happier and holier.

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