



AVE MARIA PRESS

ILLUMINATE

LEADER'S GUIDE

A GUIDED ADVENT
JOURNAL FOR PRAYER
AND MEDITATION

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GETTING STARTED

Whether you're using *Illuminate: A Guided Advent Journal for Prayer and Meditation* by Fr. John Nepil with a group from your parish, in your regular small group, or in a book club, this guide is designed to help your community get the most out of the time you spend reading and praying through the *Illuminate* journal this Advent. While *Illuminate* already includes daily readings, reflection questions, and prayers, this guide will help you and your group have meaningful discussions about the weekly themes in *Illuminate* as you take this Advent journey together.

This leader's guide is designed to cover five meetings, each running approximately forty-five minutes to one hour. The first meeting is an introductory session. Books should be handed out before starting this meeting so that the attendees can be prepared to discuss this week's material. This introductory meeting should happen either the week before Advent begins or at the beginning of the first week of Advent. The remaining four meetings correspond to *Illuminate*'s weekly themes—discovering God through word, light, faith, and life by reflecting on scripture and the writings of Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar—and should take place either at the end of the corresponding week or at the beginning of the next week.

Each weekly meeting follows a simple pattern: an opening prayer, a scripture reading, questions to help prompt discussion, a closing prayer, and a practical action item for the week. As the leader, you may want to read the prayers and discussion questions verbatim, or you may find that you prefer to use them to inspire your own approach. Either way, the goal is to draw the members of the group into vibrant discussion in which they share their own insights gained or questions raised during their reading, journaling, and praying with *Illuminate* that week.

Materials Needed for Leaders

- *Illuminate: A Guided Advent Journal for Prayer and Meditation*
- *Illuminate Leader's Guide*
- Pen or pencil for taking notes
- Bible

Materials Needed for Group Members

- *Illuminate: A Guided Advent Journal for Prayer and Meditation*
- Pen or pencil for taking notes
- Optional: Bible

FIRST MEETING: INTRODUCTIONS

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we gather together in prayer this Advent to reflect on the coming of your Son, Jesus, as the Light of the world. Send your Holy Spirit to fill our hearts and minds as we read, reflect, and pray—both individually throughout the weeks ahead and together in these meetings. During these darkening days of winter, as we look forward to Christmas, illuminate our souls with the presence of your Son. Help us to prepare for his coming and to take what we learn here into our daily lives this Advent season. Amen.

Welcome

- After the opening prayer, spend a few minutes introducing yourself and allowing attendees to introduce themselves to the group.
- Check that all attendees have already received their copies of *Illuminate*.
- Ensure that the attendees know what to expect:
 - They will spend time each day throughout Advent with the *Illuminate* journal, individually or with loved ones. (It may be helpful to describe briefly the journal's format for each day: a short meditation, a reflection question for journaling, and a prayer.)
 - For the upcoming meetings, they should bring their copy of *Illuminate*, a pen or pencil, and (optionally) a Bible.
 - They should come to each meeting ready to talk. Attendees should be prepared, with your guidance, to ask questions, share insights, and encourage one another.

Scripture Reading: Romans 13:11–14

Discussion Questions

1. In the scripture passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we read, "The night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness [and] put on the armor of light" (Rom 13:12). What thoughts come to you as you read this passage? How do you envision light to act as armor against works of darkness? In what ways do you find yourself in darkness now, in need of the light of Christ? Do you perhaps need his presence in a time of suffering or his help in breaking free from certain habits this Advent?

2. In the introduction to *Illuminate* (vii–viii), Fr. John describes Advent as "a season of trustful surrender, renewed receptivity, a silence in vigil." How does this description speak to you, and does it seem true to your experience of Advent in the past? How would you like this coming Advent to be a time of surrender, receptivity, or silence? Which of these three experiences do you most seek?

FIRST MEETING: INTRODUCTIONS

3. In the “How to Use This Journal” section of *Illuminate* (ix–xii), there is a brief description of each of the four parts of the book and the topics of our meditation for the coming weeks. Which of these topics do you most look forward to reflecting on and exploring, and why?

4. Do you find it easy or difficult during Advent to focus on prayer and preparation for the celebration of Christ’s birth? What are some of the challenges that make it difficult? What are some practices or traditions that you have found helpful?

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we enter into this holy Advent season, may we encounter you and your Son more deeply as the Light of our souls. Help us to recognize the Word as the beginning of all things, to accept the light that Christ brings to each of us, to grow in the faith you freely give us, and to understand what it means to be born to new life in you. Transform our hearts through prayer and your Word, and help us support one another through our reflections in the coming weeks. We ask this through Christ, our Light. Amen.

Take Action

Make a commitment to set aside fifteen minutes during your days or evenings to work through the journal and reflect, allowing Christ’s light to work in your soul through silence and prayer this Advent.

SECOND MEETING:

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: WORD

Opening Prayer

Lord, may our prayers and reflections throughout this meeting serve to draw us into an encounter with your Son, the Light who illuminates our souls. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us as we pray together, reflect, and read your Word. During these darkening days of winter, as we look forward to Christmas, teach us how to welcome Christ the Light into our daily lives. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 8:5–11

Discussion Questions

1. In the scripture passage from St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we read, "The night is advanced, the day is at hand. Let us then throw off the works of darkness [and] put on the armor of light" (Rom 13:12). What thoughts come to you as you read this passage? How do you envision light to act as armor against works of darkness? In what ways do you find yourself in darkness now, in need of the light of Christ? Do you perhaps need his presence in a time of suffering or his help in breaking free from certain habits this Advent?

2. In Sunday's meditation (3–4), Fr. John reminds us that God's Word began the act of Creation, with everything that exists flowing from him. What do you think about the truth that everything and everyone is constantly held in existence by God's Word? How might this truth lead you to see the world and other people in a new light?

3. Fr. John inspires us in the same meditation to allow God, not ourselves, to be the beginning of our lives. How are you tempted to see yourself as the creator of your life? How can you surrender your plans, your experiences, your sufferings, and your joys to his loving hands as he holds you through it all? How can you "attune" yourself to God's symphony in hope, as Fr. John encourages in Tuesday's meditation?

SECOND MEETING:

FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: WORD

4. In Wednesday's meditation (15–16), Fr. John speaks of the “silence of the Father,” who points us toward his Son. What do these words tell you about the Father and his love for his Son? In what ways does silence speak? How do you value silence in your life? In what ways is silence important in our society today, and how might it bring healing to our world and to each of our lives? How does silence lead you closer to God?

5. Fr. John says, “Everything in creation speaks of God” in Thursday's meditation (19–20). How do you find this statement to be true? In what ways does nature speak to you of God? How do you see God through other people in your life? How might you better find God in what he has created?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, our Light, you are the Word who speaks all things into being. Help us to discover through your creation how much you love us, and inspire us to value and protect all that you have created. Speak your healing and truth into our hearts this Advent as we seek to know you better. Fill our souls with your light. Amen.

Take Action

This week, take a walk in silence through a beautiful part of nature—such as in a park, through the woods, or by a beach—and let this time inspire you to hear God speaking to you through silence and the beauty of his creation.

THIRD MEETING:

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT: LIGHT

Opening Prayer

Lord, may our prayers and reflections throughout this meeting serve to draw us into an encounter with your Son, the Light who illuminates our souls. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us as we pray together, reflect, and read your Word. During these darkening days of winter, as we look forward to Christmas, teach us how to welcome Christ the Light into our daily lives. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:25–31

Discussion Questions

1. In the scripture passage from Isaiah, we read, “They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength. . . . They will run and not grow weary, walk and not grow faint” (Is 40:31). What thoughts and feelings arise in you as you read this passage? How do you turn to God in hope during times of darkness? Fr. John quotes Adrienne von Speyr in Monday’s meditation (37–38), saying that there are three forms of darkness: “the night created by God, the quality of God that led him to create night and finally the night of sin created by man.” In the third form of darkness—that caused by sin—are you sometimes discouraged by sinful habits or suffering that is the result of sin in the world? Like Isaiah, how might you turn to God in hope and confidence as the Light who illuminates the darkness?

2. As Fr. John mentions in Wednesday’s meditation (45–46), Jesus is called the “Daystar” by St. Peter, and St. John the Baptist is the “first star in the Christological constellation, which in time will become the Church.” What do you think about this image of the Church as a constellation, with members of the Church as stars, like Jesus? How do you feel called to shine the light of Christ on the world around you? In what ways can you share his light with others in your daily life?

THIRD MEETING:

SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT: LIGHT

3. Like St. John the Baptist, we are called to humble ourselves to allow Jesus to shine. Fr. John notes in Thursday's meditation (49) that St. John the Baptist's birth is celebrated at the summer solstice, after which the sunshine begins to decrease, while Jesus's is celebrated at the winter solstice, when the sunshine increases. How are you inspired by St. John the Baptist's example of humility and pointing toward Jesus? In what ways do you struggle to allow Jesus and his message to take precedence over your own feeling of success or desire for acknowledgment? How do you feel called to follow St. John the Baptist's humble example as one of Christ's disciples?

4. In Friday's meditation (53–54), Fr. John emphasizes the importance of relationships with others. He quotes Adrienne von Speyr, who notes that we often learn about ourselves through knowing our neighbors. In what ways do you find this statement to be true? How do others teach you about yourself, either in negative or positive ways? How might you allow the light of Christ that is present in others to teach you about his particular love for each person and his love for you?

5. "Life in the light is a doing of the truth," Fr. John states in Saturday's meditation (57). What do you think of this statement? How do you equate light with truth? In what ways does living in truth, according to God's teachings, bring light to the world? How do you feel called to live in this way? In addition to St. John the Baptist, who inspires you to live in truth and light, whether saints of the past or inspirational figures in the present?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, you are the Light who shines through the darkness of sin and suffering in our world. Help us to be humble and to share your light with others in our lives. May we allow you to work through us to share your hope, truth, and love with our neighbors. Fill our souls with your light. Amen.

Take Action

Read about a canonized saint with whom you are not familiar. Consider how this saint lived in truth and shared Christ's light with the world. Follow his or her example in your own life.

FOURTH MEETING:

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT: FAITH

Opening Prayer

Lord, may our prayers and reflections throughout this meeting serve to draw us into an encounter with your Son, the Light who illuminates our souls. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us as we pray together, reflect, and read your Word. During these darkening days of winter, as we look forward to Christmas, teach us how to welcome Christ the Light into our daily lives. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26–38

Discussion Questions

1. In the reading from the Gospel of Luke, we recall the story of how Mary accepted with faith that she would become the mother of the Son of God, the Messiah. As you read this passage, what thoughts and feelings arise in you? In what ways does Mary's faith inspire you? What do you think about her responses to the angel and about how God was working in her soul? How does her cooperation with God's gift of faith and grace lead you to embrace this gift of faith in your own life?

2. In Sunday's meditation (63–64), Fr. John describes faith as "pure gift." He explains, "Faith is more than the personal experience of being found, caught, or rescued by Christ; it is about the salvation of the world." What do you think of these words? In what ways do you see faith as a personal experience? In what ways do you see faith as the salvation of all? How do you feel called to participate in God's mission of salvation by sharing your own gift of faith with others?

3. Fr. John quotes Adrienne von Speyr in Wednesday's meditation (75): "It is a shining movement of light to which God can add the grace of being a revelation of the light. Through grace men can show one another God, give one another God, and reveal God to one another." What do you think of this quotation? Do you feel honored to be able to participate in the grace of showing others God? How do you see Mary's example as being a "revelation of the light" by pointing toward Jesus? How do you feel called to do the same in your daily life?

FOURTH MEETING:

THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT: FAITH

4. In Friday's meditation (83–84), Fr. John discusses the idea of chiaroscuro in art and describes our spiritual lives as similarly having a contrast between darkness and light. Although God freely offers us his gift of faith, grace, and light, we often struggle to cooperate. This difficulty can cause us to experience darkness or suffering even as we grow in God's image. What do you think of these ideas, and how can you relate to them? In what ways do you see God working in your life that you find challenging? How might you accept and participate in his grace more readily?

5. Fr. John states in Saturday's meditation (87–88) that we are called to "shift the center [of our gravity] to Christ, letting the stammering cries of the grasping ego to be silenced in the presence of the living God." Do you find yourself trying to be in control of your future, your spiritual life, and your faith? How might letting go of the "ego" and accepting God's presence and grace lighten your load as you seek to grow closer to him?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, you freely give us the gift of faith. Help us to accept it, to cooperate with it, and to allow you to work in our hearts. Lead us closer to you, and give us the courage to share our faith with others for the salvation of the world. Fill our souls with your light. Amen.

Take Action

Think of a way to share your faith with another person, or thank someone whose faith has inspired you.

FIFTH MEETING:

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT: LIFE

Opening Prayer

Lord, may our prayers and reflections throughout this meeting serve to draw us into an encounter with your Son, the Light who illuminates our souls. Send your Holy Spirit to be with us as we pray together, reflect, and read your Word. During these darkening days of winter, as we look forward to Christmas, teach us how to welcome Christ the Light into our daily lives. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 1:1–7

Discussion Questions

1. In St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, we read that Christians are "called to belong to Jesus Christ" and "called to be holy" (Rom 1:6–7). We are called to new life in Christ, as the theme of this week's meditations highlights. Have you considered that you are called to embrace a new life? How would your life be different if you lived more fully this calling to holiness? In what ways can you try to live it now?

2. In Monday's meditation (97–98), Fr. John explains that we belong to God not by our own merits but entirely through his gift. Which quotation from scripture or from a theologian in this meditation most inspired you? How do you feel about the fact that God wants all of us to be his children and have new life in him despite our sinfulness and unworthiness? How does this inspire you to treat others?

3. Fr. John reflects in Tuesday's meditation (101) on the Prayer of St. Francis: "The call is to fight the instinct of self-preservation and trust the poor man from Assisi. 'It is in giving that we receive.'" How have you found the words of this famous prayer to be true in your own experience? In what ways do you sometimes resist self-giving by instead focusing on self-preservation? How do you feel inspired to live more generously, both materially and spiritually, in your relationships with others?

FIFTH MEETING:

FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT: LIFE

4. In Friday's meditation (113–114), Fr. John notes that as adults we often forget that we don't own anything; in fact, we have received all from God. Do you find yourself forgetting this truth? In what ways have you personally recognized or experienced this truth?? How might you live with more gratitude? How might you live more freely by being more detached from accumulating things and instead being more grateful for and generous with that which you do have?

5. Fr. John notes in the meditation for Christmas Eve (117–118) that Mary gives us an example of living more slowly, without hurry. As Mother of God and Mother of the Church, Mary shows us how to live in peace and acceptance of God's will in the present moment. How do you feel inspired by Mary's example? How might you better live in the present without hurrying? What in your life could you reduce in order to have more time to sit in God's presence in prayer?

Closing Prayer

Jesus, you have given us new life as God's children by becoming a child like us, dying for our sins, and rising again on the third day. Like your mother, Mary, help us to live this new life more fully and to slow down and embrace the present moment. Fill our souls with your light. Amen.

Take Action

Choose one thing to give up or spend less time on after Christmas so that you have time and space to spend with God in prayer or to be more present to your family.