

CEIST

Catholic Education
An Irish Schools Trust



Advent Resource: 2020



"Change knelt down beside me in the wilderness, and in the gentlest voice I have ever heard, she said, "I love being the reasons for all of your beginnings." Then she kissed the tears from my eyes, stood up and reached for my hand."

Heather K. O'Hara

This ADVENT resource for CEIST schools has two main parts.

The first part is a reflection for you the Principal and Deputy Principal for your own personal and spiritual nourishment. The reflection is broken into four parts representing the four weeks of Advent and the four themes of Advent; hope, peace, joy and love. These themes are positioned like a countdown in Advent. The first theme is the promise of hope. Secondly, we celebrate the peace to which we are invited. In the third week we consider the joy that Christmas brings. And then, in week four we get ready to celebrate Christmas as the ultimate expression of God's love for all of humanity and all of creation. All four themes are very much presented in the context of the reality of the last year and are an invitation to process some of what 2020 has thrown at us and our schools. You may well feel like saying a firm 'good riddance' to 2020 as the year draws to a close but it might also be worth taking a moment to reflect on what 2020 has gifted us all.

The second part is a resource for use in your school; with students and staff. It is a very practical resource with a very practical suggested activity that we hope all CEIST school communities can get behind.

The second half of the resource is focused very specifically on the theme, 'Sowing Hope'. There is a spiritual dimension to this, an ecological dimension and a very practical dimension and we interweave all three dimensions hopefully to give a really 'whole-school' experience of Advent for your students. Therefore, in this second part of the CEIST Advent 2020 resource you will find:

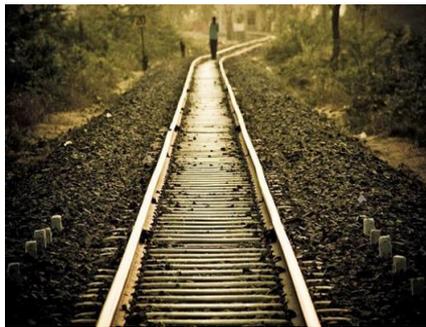
- Very short weekly reflections to accompany the lighting of your school's Advent Calendar
- A prayer service to accompany your 'Sowing hope' moment as an entire school community. This prayer service involves planting a wildflower garden in your school. (If you already have one, you can either adapt the service to that reality or you can plant another one!)

It is this final, slightly longer prayer service that will probably make sense of all of the other material so we'd really encourage you to try to do this as a school community! Imagine if all 107 CEIST schools participated! What a tremendous symbol of hope and commitment to bio-diversity that would be.

PART 1: What is Advent for me in 2020 as a leader of a CEIST school? A reflection for Principals and Deputy Principals.

Introduction

This reflection is for your own use, as Principal or Deputy Principal of your school. Mirroring the four weeks of Advent, the reflection is broken into 4 parts, and each part has a set of reflective questions.



These question moments are designed to be used very simply. We recommend that you take these questions with you on a walk - even one question every two days would be great. Get out in nature or around your town. Spend time in the fresh air and take the time to notice all the wonderful things happening in nature all around you. In terms of the questions, obviously there are no right or wrong answers; they are simply designed to spark a little bit of thought as you consciously travel through

Advent, processing 2020 and preparing for Christmas and 2021.

There is another important reason why we are suggesting you walk and pray/reflect. The overarching theme of our Advent 2020 resource is **'Sowing Hope'**. Appendix A is a recently written article from Fr. Sean McDonagh on the importance of re-wilding set within a theological rationale. Here he reminds us that Advent falls in the depths of winter, and that Winter is actually a time of quiet renewal. If we spend time in nature we are reminded that Winter is not about death at all, but rather about preparation – preparation for the hope that comes with Spring. The parallels with Advent are clear and going out for your daily walk while reflecting on these themes will help, we hope, to confirm this.

Therefore, nature in winter time has a very particular lesson to teach us about hope; a perennial hope that Spring always follows and that what we are witnessing is not death, but is in fact the earth resting, preparing, silently building itself up again for new life. Each of the four reflections are connected to the resource's overarching theme, 'Sowing Hope' and we hope that they help you come to Christmas, to the great Christian festival of hope, with renewed energy and a renewed sense of your own vocation as leader of your school.



We know these times have been extremely challenging and we hope Advent will be a time of real grace for you; that you'll be able to find time to grab moments during Advent to really re-connect with yourself, your faith, nature and your own gratitude for the gifts in your life. We also hope that once Advent is over, you will experience the kind of Christmas that will renew you for Term 2 and the challenges ahead.

Week 1: Hope

Many of us will be very familiar with the Monaghan poet Patrick Kavanagh's masterpiece, *Advent*. It is a very good way to begin any reflection on Advent but may very well offer a fresh insight into an Advent experience befitting the extraordinary year that has been 2020. It might be of particular use to you in your leadership role of your school.

As we begin it is worth reminding ourselves of Kavanagh's poem, 'Advent':

*We have tested and tasted too much, lover-
Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
But here in the Advent-darkened room
Where the dry black bread and the sugarless tea
Of penance will charm back the luxury
Of a child's soul, we'll return to Doom
The knowledge we stole but could not use.*

*And the newness that was in every stale thing
When we looked at it as children: the spirit-shocking
Wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill
Or the prophetic astonishment in the tedious talking
Of an old fool will awake for us and bring
You and me to the yard gate to watch the whins
And the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins.*

*O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning-
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.*

*Won't we be rich, my love and I, and
God we shall not ask for reason's payment,
The why of heart-breaking strangeness in dreeping hedges
Nor analyse God's breath in common statement.
We have thrown into the dust-bin the clay-minted wages
Of pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour-
And Christ comes with a January flower.*

Not surprisingly this year, talk of Christmas has come even earlier than normal and with a new urgency. As I write, Halloween is barely over, Advent hasn't yet begun (or so the liturgical calendar tells us), and mainstream media, parents and their children, aunts and uncles and, and many of our public health professionals are talking about what Christmas is going to look like in 2020.

The short break at mid-term was probably more like a quick, deep inhale-exhale in preparation for what you knew what was awaiting you on your return to school

The nights feel particularly dark this year as days get shorter and shorter and time has taken on a different kind of quality; a quality that confirms that 2020 has been a year like no other.

So what then of hope? What does Kavanagh have to say about hope in *Advent*?

It is interesting to see the image Kavanagh uses of the January flower. It comes not just after Advent



but after a Christmas inspired by the kind of Advent that allows Kavanagh see things afresh and hear things anew. For Kavanagh hope is the result of a change of heart and a change of mind. It is the reward of an effort to see and hear differently. Hope is hard won; we earn it and because of that we appreciate it all the more.

Reflection questions (1) – Hope

1. Take some time to reflect on Patrick's Kavanagh's poem. Reflect as you walk, on the experience of 'dry black bread and sugarless tea' that the experience of the last number of months (possibly even going back to March) have been. Have they refined you? Have you been tested by them? Have you grown to any new realisations because of them, in your role as a Principal/Deputy Principal in particular?
2. What signs of hope do you see around you as you walk?
3. The first week of Advent is offered to hope; spend some time reflecting on your own hopes for the coming months. As you walk think about what hope means now to your school community. Again, has 'hope' as a concept taken on a new meaning or a new feeling for you as a Principal/Deputy Principal?
4. Hope is a virtue in Christianity. How do you feel connected to that in your own faith journey?
5. Take some time to express gratitude for what you have in your own life and for your work and in your own way offer a prayer of thanks to the One who is the source of all that is good.

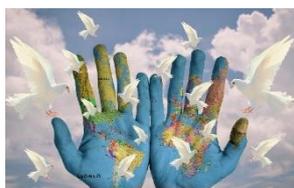
Week 2: Peace

So perhaps it is not so surprising that we are already looking to Christmas. Advent has already started in our hearts. We are waiting and hoping that the penitential feeling of these difficult days, weeks and indeed months, will give way to something new, warm, and familiar. We are tired of the extraordinariness of this year – we’ve come to recoil at the words ‘unprecedented times’ – and we want a return to “ordinary’s plenty.”

For so many reasons, we are all longing for the familiar peace and joy that comes with Christmas and so we imagine those happy days with a real longing. In some ways, it is this longing, this hopefulness which we are all so obviously experiencing these weeks that actually best captures what Advent might really mean to us in our school communities.

Patrick Kavanagh’s poem, *Advent* now more than ever captures the raw hunger for a return to something that is familiar; that feels very near to us in our memories but quite distant to us in terms of our experiences. What is it that we are longing for? What is it that we are waiting for with such a heightened sense of expectation?

In Kavanagh’s poem there is an interesting juxtaposition between what is ‘too much’ and what is ‘enough’. Paradoxically, Kavanagh tells us knowing what our ‘enough’ is can help “charm back the luxury of a child’s soul”. What is Kavanagh teaching us here. Like gold tested in fire, Advent can be a time where we begin to distil down what is ‘too much’ and what is ‘enough’. Peace is that realisation that ‘enough’ is in fact ‘enough’. Where I am, what I have, who I am with... all of that is enough. I feel at peace and I feel gratitude. For Christians, Christmas tells us what is enough; God is ‘enough’, Love is ‘enough’, peace is ‘enough’.



Reflection questions (2) - Peace

1. As you reflect on Advent as a feeling of hopeful waiting, what is it that you are waiting for? Try to distil your own thinking down as you walk. Are you hoping for a respite? Are you hoping for a break? Are you hoping for a return to normal? Or is there an even deeper hope at play within you? A hope for peace perhaps; a peace that reminds us that all around us might be in chaos but in our hearts we can still know the peace of the One who reminds us we are not on our own. Spend some time with ‘peace’ both as a concept and hopefully as an experience. What brings you peace in your own life? And in your work?

2. What peace comes to you as you spend time in nature, breathing in deeply and exhaling well as you walk? What are you noticing around you?
3. Does your faith bring you peace? Why? Why not? Where are you on that journey?
4. What 'peace' comes from your work, if any? Again, try to distil down, as you walk the peace that lingers and mingles in the everyday ordinariness of your work.
5. Again, take some time to name the things for which you are grateful.

Week 3: Joy

In Kavanagh's *Advent* he connects very beautifully, a number of key themes that appear in much of his poetry. Among these themes is an incredible sense of the power of the ordinary, an awareness of the sacramentality of the things we may have stopped noticing as gift. *Advent* draws us from a feasting that dulls the senses into a fasting that notices what is missing and craves what is really beautiful about life represented here in the "decent men who barrow dung", "the tedious talking of an old fool" and the "village boys lurching". *Advent* is an opportunity to re-draw our own inner landscapes; our own understanding of what is real and important and what is not so real and not so important. *Advent* can connect us to the joy of really attending to and noticing the miraculous and extraordinary that happen every day in our lives.

A second key theme is Kavanagh's deep appreciation of his natural environment; an environment with which he undeniably had a love/hate kind of relationship. But in *Advent*, he describes how we are called to "the newness that was in every stale thing when we looked at it as children". Included here is "the spirit-shocking wonder in a black slanting Ulster hill" and the "the bog-holes, cart-tracks, old stables where Time begins". God's breath is seen in the people, the places and the natural world in which Kavanagh moved and he suggests very beautifully that an *Advent* lived well can uncover this for us too.

In the context of joy in the ordinary and an appreciation of the natural world, it is interesting that childhood is positively mentioned twice in this poem. As we approach the great festival of childhood, personified in the baby Jesus, it is worth reflecting on what the luxury of a child's soul might look like. Perhaps it is about joy; the joy we see in children when they jump in muddy puddles, the joy we see in children when they open their presents on Christmas day, the joy we see them take in sometimes the most mundane and ordinary things you can imagine. Is there something about childhood that can re-connect us to joy?

Reflection Questions 3 - Joy

1. As you pray/walk your way through *Advent* this year, what is it about joy that matters this year more than ever? Is there a way of connecting your joy to that childhood wonder and joy Kavanagh alludes to?
2. Are you enjoying your walk? What is it about being out in nature that brings you joy?
3. 'Joy to the world' is a Christmas hymn we all know. What for you is the connection between joy and Christ?

4. What brings you deep joy in your own work. Try as you walk to get connected to that joy? See how that feeling of being re-connected energises you and see how it makes you feel.
5. Again, take some time to name the things for which you are grateful.

Week 4: Love

So the pandemic of 2020 has shocked us – perhaps it is, as previously suggested, our “black bread and sugarless tea”. It has woken many of us up to the reality of what really matters, what is really important to us in life; family, friendship, community, our health, our natural world and our faith. Perhaps then as we celebrate Advent in our Catholic schools it might be a good opportunity to take some time to reflect on this theme of ‘awakening’, of ‘seeing anew’, so that like Kavanagh, we can with absolute clarity and real joy welcome Christ who comes with the January flower.



Christmas, to use a popular modernism, gives most of us the ‘warm fuzzies.’ These feelings can come from buying presents, putting up bright lights, getting a Christmas tree, telling Santa stories to our children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, receiving gifts and of course sharing a huge meal on Christmas day with family. Christmas brings out the child in all of us and we re-connect with lovely feelings of excitement and joy. It’s wonderful to spend time just relaxing and enjoying one another’s company, to find ourselves at home and at peace.

These very simple human experiences of reciprocity, of companionship, of story-telling, of ease, and of being at home are all immensely valuable. As Christians we believe that they also point us to the very heart of who God is and what Christmas is about. We believe absolutely Christmas is about these very human things – this isn’t a simple either/or equation - but we also believe that these very simple things tell us something about who God is. *God is Love, God is Family, God is that immense feeling of arriving home and being at home.*

Of course, Christmas can also be massively challenging for families for a whole host of reasons and that reality has to be acknowledged as well. For many people, Christmas is the opposite; it’s a lonely time that causes feelings of deep sorrow and isolation. People in these situations may turn to faith for consolation but in reality, for most of us, faith alone can never fully compensate for the absence of friendship, family and community. The two things are inextricably connected for Christians; to paraphrase scripture, how can I believe in a God I cannot see if I don’t know anything of love from the people I see around me?

In Christmas we meet a God who loves us so much he becomes one of us, and actually even weaker than one of us adults; he becomes a defenceless baby born in poverty, in a manger. No longer distant or removed from our pain, our joy, our anxiety, our hopes, he comes to us and in coming to

us we – and he – find ourselves at home together and in this everything is changed. By this act of love, God transforms our world and tells us of our value, a value we had forgotten, a worth we had stopped acknowledging. If we take the incarnation seriously, if we believe God became man, a baby, a son, a cousin, then we realise God comes to bless our human reality, to affirm our humanity, to allow us hear again and again, “and God saw that it was very good”. So Christmas is about realising that God comes to save us by helping us realise what is very best about who we are; relational, loving and embodied. In Jesus, spirit and mind, soul and body are united. Heaven and earth are drawn together in a new and dynamic way. All of nature is blessed; the star shone over the stable, the animals’ breath warmed the baby Jesus, Mary was in labour and Jesus was born.

The embodied, incarnate reality of Jesus’ birth was, and is, undeniable and all of creation sings his praises.

In this context, Advent becomes a time of deep personal preparation for a new awareness of our own value and the value of others. Or as Kavanagh puts it, Advent is about becoming witnesses to the transformation from an adult awareness of “pleasure, knowledge and the conscious hour” so that like children we might experience that joy that is our God of Love; that is Christ, represented here by the simple beauty of the ‘January flower’.

How wonderful it is to consider God in this way! How transformative it can be to give time to consider and to pray about this way of viewing Immanuel, God-with-us. If lived in this way, without fail, Christmas comes as a shock to us, breaking us open to see not only God in an entirely new way, but maybe even more importantly opening us up to see ourselves, one another and all of creation in a deeply transformative way.

But it is also, of course, about asking who is not being welcomed, who is lonely, who feels unvalued and unloved. Because if I believe God-is-with-us, it means God is also-with-them; those on the margins, those who are struggling and those who feel forgotten. What that says to us as Christians and to our schools as places that profess the Christian message at their heart is an essential consideration in our preparations for Advent.

Reflection Questions 4: Love

1. God *is* Love”! Take some time to reflect on your own calling to be principal or deputy principal of your school. How is that rooted in love, for you? How might these days of preparation, these Advent weeks, allow you to reconnect with that rich vein of inspiration at the heart of your work? How might this inspiration, rooted in love, transform you in your work now and into the future?
2. Our tradition has sometimes tended to divide up the spiritual from the physical, the body from the soul, the heart from the mind, heaven from the natural world. How challenging do you find the idea that Love (and God) is about unifying all of this reality at Christmas?

3. As you walk and reflect, where are you seeing signs of God's love for you and for all creation?
4. Again, as you walk take some time to name the things for which you feel most grateful.



A final word.....

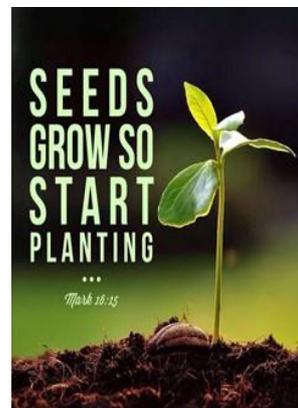
And so we come full circle in many ways. Christmas really *is* about family and friendship, it really *is* about receiving and giving, it really is about being at home and finding that God somehow is there in the midst of all of that we are together and do together. Ultimately, Advent is a great reconciler; it is about finding peace and joy in knowing God's love for us and for all of humanity and indeed all of creation. Being fully human, being fully with our families, being fully present to nature, being fully aware of the giftedness of our life and the lives of others; that is the real meaning of Christmas into which the child Jesus invites us. See how much love the Father has lavished on us! And then in awareness of that love, see how it is that peace breaks through, even and perhaps more especially for Christmas in a year like no other; the year 2020.

And so your final prayer is to take a deep breath and to breathe in all of that giftedness and joy as you say hello to a fresh start soon in 2021 and goodbye to the good, and the not so good of 2020!

Part 2: Advent Resources for Your School – ‘Sowing Hope’

Introduction

2020 has been one of the most remarkable years in recent memory. It has challenged each of us in so many ways. You can be equally sure that it has challenged your students. Many of them will be asking questions not too dissimilar from the kinds of questions you have been asking. Included in these questions will be questions around what we have learned from 2020, in particular in terms of the care we give to one another and the care we give to our common home. For this reason, this second part of our Advent Resource links Advent to our care of creation and is centred even more obviously on the theme, “Sowing Hope”.



There are two parts to this second half of the resource. See Appendix A for a rationale for the work we are proposing. It is written by Fr. Sean McDonagh. In his rationale he weaves together science and faith to create a convincing case for all schools and parishes around ‘Sowing Hope’ particularly during these weeks of Advent.

Part A: This is a prayer resource linked to your school’s Advent Wreath. We invite you to prominently (but safely, of course) display your Advent wreath and to pray this resource, perhaps as part of an intercom-based prayer moment every Monday of Advent.

Part B: This part of the resource provides for a prayer moment for your whole school, led by your student leadership team or school’s environment team and school’s senior management team. It is hoped that this final part of the resource will allow for the whole school community to see a practical impact of the prayer the lighting of the Advent Wreath. In this way, the planning of a wildflower garden or the planting of Spring Bulbs is a very practical expression not only of Advent Hope but of your school’s desire to give practical expression to it through thoughtful care of our common home. See the National Biodiversity Data Centre’s booklet *Faith Communities; Actions to help pollinators* at www.pollinators.ie for some practical hints and tips and supplement of course with your own local knowledge and expertise!

Part A: Praying Advent using your Advent Wreath

These very simple and very short prayers for Weeks 1 to 4 of Advent are designed for use over the intercom. Each weekly moment is set out as follows:

Week 1: 30th November – Blessing of our Advent Wreath and the theme of Hope

Week 2: 7th December – on the theme of Peace

Week 3: 14th December – on the theme of Joy

Week 4: 21st December – on the theme of Love



We would suggest that you have your Advent wreath prominently displayed in your school. For safety reasons, it obviously is not possible to keep candles lit all the time. In addition, with your RE



teachers' and/or school's Student Leadership Team's help you might help set up a slightly bigger sacred space around the Advent wreath that could include symbols of each of the themes and indeed the four words of Advent (Hope, Peace, Joy and Love). A good sense of the outside coming inside would also be helpful in terms of the overall theme of 'Sowing Hope'. Maybe a few potted plants or symbols of wintertime would be good too.

In terms of personnel for each prayer moment you will need two students, perhaps a First Year and a Sixth Year.

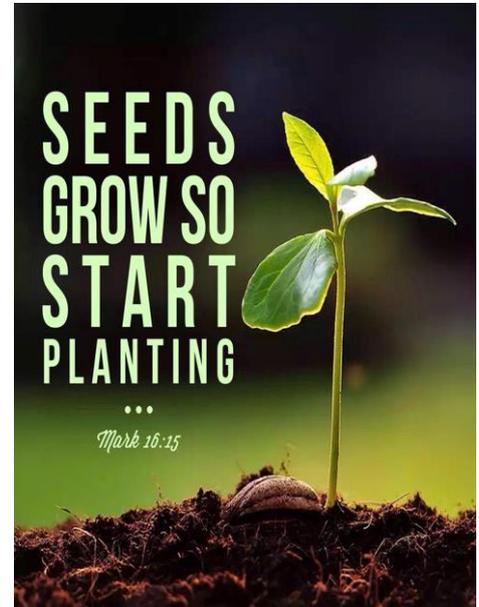
For the final prayer moment for Week 4 we suggest a different format (see below)

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Week 1: Hope

Principal: You are very welcome to our prayer this morning and for our prayer we are going to be blessing our Advent Wreath. Advent is a time of preparation for Christmas, and if we ever needed a Christmas it is this year! Well done to everyone for getting this far. So we pause as we pray to thank God for being with us this morning and always. I'm joined this morning by _____ (student) and _____ (student). They are going to be doing some of the readings for us. The theme of Advent for this year is '**Sowing Hope**'.

Student 1: 'Sowing Hope' is a really simple way of thinking about Advent because we believe that even in the darkest of winters, nature is still working away. Nature is having a rest, getting ready for Spring. Even in the darkest of days and the bleakest of winters there is hope.

Student 2: We know that nature is under pressure because of climate change. One of the key ways nature is under pressure is because of the significant reduction of bio-diversity. We also know that there are very practical ways we can reverse this catastrophic loss of bio-diversity and it can all start by appreciating and enjoying the great gift of our natural world. Spending time in nature, looking at how nature responds to these dark and cold days is a lesson for us in hope.

Student 1: And so we pray for Hope. We pray that we will always be people who hope. We have lots to be hopeful about and as we prepare for Christmas, we can feel that hope rising within us and giving us new energy. We are like nature in that way too.

Principal: And so, on behalf of the school community, I bless our Advent Wreath. You will see our Advent Wreath every day when you come into the building. The green of the Advent Wreath and the first Candle we are going to light now shortly are what we focus on today. Green represents new life. And a candle represents light in darkness. And so _____ is going to light our candle for us.

Student 1 (Lights candle)

Student 2: Lord, we pray for one another as we journey through these four weeks of Advent. Jesus tells us, "I am the light of the world". Jesus brightens up the darkness and the despair, he brings light and warmth to all that we do. Be with us these days of preparation. Lord hear us.

Student 1: Lord, we pray for our natural world. Nature is taking a rest. We pray that these weeks of Advent we will pay attention to the beauty all around us and learn from nature that even in the darkest of winter, hope is preparing to flower again in Springtime. Lord hear us.

Principal: We finish now together by saying the *Our Father*.

Week 2: Peace

Principal: As the Second week of Advent begins, we reflect a little on the meaning of Peace. We begin by listening to a poem called the Peace of Wild things, by the poet, Wendell Berry

Student 1:

**When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world and am free.**

Student 2: This Advent we pray for this peace; that the peace that we see in nature, that we can experience for ourselves on walks or cycles in nature will comfort and console us always.

Student 1: But we also know that nature is in trouble. Scientists also tell us we are now in an age of mass extinction. Species are dying off at the rate of one per day (some estimates are much higher). The resultant loss is not only an ecological crisis, but also a failure of human beings to celebrate what God has made. So even as we celebrate the peace we know nature can give us, we also know of the damage we are causing. What can we do?

Student 1: We begin though by looking at our own situations. Is there anything we can do as individuals or as a school or as a parish or community? We can begin by just being more aware of the peace that nature offers us and the challenge that we are constantly presented with to protect her for the good of all of God's creatures, including human beings.

Principal: And so we light our second candle on our Advent Wreath. This candle represents peace. This Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, may we always be aware of our responsibility to one another and to all of creation.

Student 2 Lights advent candle

Student 1: Lord, you are the God of peace. We pray for peace in our hearts, in our communities and in our world. We pray in particular that we will live in peace with creation. Lord hear us.

Principal: And we conclude our short prayer service by saying together, "Our Father..."

Week 3: Joy

Principal: As our third week of Advent begins, we will be lighting our third Advent candle, a pink candle. The colour pink here represents joy! Yesterday was Gaudete Sunday or Sunday of Rejoicing. We rejoice not just because we are looking forward to Christmas but because we know, with Christmas comes Jesus and with Jesus comes resurrection joy as well.

Student 1: The scientist Albert Einstein once wrote that the joy of looking at nature and understanding nature is nature's most precious gift. This Advent as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, we pray that we will give ourselves time and space to enjoy nature and through that allow ourselves to be renewed again.

Student 2: Life is very busy and there are so many distractions. Modern life means we spend a lot of time inside or in cars. That has meant that we can become very disconnected from our natural world. But we know too that we will only protect and nurture something if we love it. And we will only love it, if we know it.

Student 1: The birth of Jesus changed history. This Advent, we pray that we too will have a massive change of heart, individually and collectively, about how we view our natural world. And from that change of heart that we will slowly begin to know and love our natural world.

Student 2: So this Advent, we will all endeavour to really get to know our natural world. There is a great App called, Picture Me, that lets you identify and learn about a leaf or a flower or a tree. It is amazingly easy now to learn about nature and hopefully learn to love so much in our natural world. Maybe think about downloading it when you get a chance and then using it when you go for a walk.

Principal: And so we light our third candle, representing **Joy**. The baby Jesus brought so much joy into our world; blessing it with his presence, with his healing and with his wisdom. As we light our third candle may we all take a moment to feel grateful for all that we have and all that we are.

Student 2 Lights advent candle

Student 1: Lord, we can imagine the joy you brought to Mary and to Joseph and the joy you brought to your friends. We pray for our families and our friends, bless us all in all that we do together this Advent and this Christmas. Lord hear us.

Student 2: Lord, we know that we sometimes fail in our relationships and also in terms of how we care of our planet. Renew us in our resolve to take care of one another and to take care of our natural world. Lord hear us.

Principal: We conclude by saying together together, "Our Father..."

Week 4: Love

Principal: We come to light our fourth and final candle this week. Christmas is now very close. We are feeling relieved and happy and we're looking forward to the break at Christmas and hopefully being able to relax with our families. Over the last four weeks of Advent we have noticed a few things about the Advent Wreath. It is not an accident that traditionally the candles of Advent wreaths are placed in greenery; representing new life and new growth that we know will come in the Springtime. And often the greenery we use is from evergreen trees and shrubs. We noticed the pink candle for joy. Today I'd ask you to have a look at the fact that the Advent Wreath is in a circle. The circle is used to represent God's love; no beginning, no ending, eternal.

Student 1: The famous Beatle John Lennon once said that love was the answer to all of our questions and problems. For Christians God is Love. That means that wherever we see or feel love, God is there. The hymn 'love came down at Christmas' captures that sentiment really well. God who is love becomes a baby and that baby changes the course of history. Love changed history then and love can change history now. In blessing us and in blessing our world by being born among us, God is teaching us that we are all deeply connected to one another.

Student 2: Pope Francis wrote a very famous letter five years ago called *Laudato Si*. It was written about the environment. In it he makes the point that when we become disconnected from ourselves, from one another and from nature, our hearts harden up a bit. He calls us all in that letter to see the ways in which we are all inter-connected; plants, animals, micro-organisms, people, trees – we all matter to one another and we are all necessary. When one species dies, it dies forever and that causes us all a great deal of sorrow and pain.

Student 2: This Advent, as we move closer to Christmas, we pray that we will let down any barriers between us and that we will see how all of life is deeply connected.

Principal: And so we light our final candle and with this lighting we pray a prayer of gratitude for all the ways you have as students of (_____) shown care for one another and for our natural world. On Friday we celebrate Christmas. On behalf of all of _____ (Deputy principal name(s)), your teachers, may I take this opportunity to wish you every blessing this Christmas and always.

Student lights candle.

Student 1: Lord, you are the God who is Love. We pray that we will always be grateful for the gifts we have received in our own lives. Lord hear us.

Student 2: Lord, we pray that we will always be open to learning more and more about our world and in knowing more, that we will love our world more. Lord hear us

Principal: We conclude now by saying together, "Our Father..."

Part B: Prayer Service for Christmas

Introduction

(This prayer service is adapted from www.franciscans.ie)

We suggest you use this prayer service with a small group. You might have an environmental group within the school who would like to lead on this, for example. Your school leadership team could also help out. This is an 'out-door' service. It will take about 15 to 20 minutes. If the weather is too bad, it can be held inside but obviously will need to be adapted accordingly!

Some music at the start and at the end would be welcome. Any music at all would be fine but if you can relate it to the theme of 'Sowing Hope' all the better.

In order to do this planting moment, you will need seeds/bulbs (depending on your preference). See National Biodiversity Data Centre's booklet *Faith Communities; Actions to help pollinators* at www.pollinators.ie for some advice on planting in winter.

If you have a Chaplain from the parish, it might be good to invite him to the service as well, within your own Covid policy obviously. A recording of the prayer service and photographs would be good so that you can share the good news of the event within your school community and outside of it as well. If the school is interested, it could also send wild flower seeds home with students – that would however be a big undertaking! (It might make an interesting social justice fundraising project for the school – just a thought.)

Prayer Service

Principal: You are very welcome to today's seed planting prayer service. As you will now know, the theme for Advent in our school this year is 'Sowing Hope'. What does that mean? That means that we know and understand that even in the darkest of days and coldest of times in winter, nature is still at work and Spring *will* follow. This gives us hope and it brings us peace and joy. It also calls us to love; to love God, one another and all of creation. Today as a symbol of that hope we are planting some wildflower seeds. Why?

Student 1: One of the realities of our planet is the loss of biodiversity. We know this is affecting everywhere on our planet and is affecting everyone on our planet. Here in Ireland, we have 98 species of wild bees with one third of them under the threat of extinction. One of the reasons why the bees are facing extinction is because they are starving. To respond to this situation, many people now do not cut their lawns as often as before, or and leave a place where the grass and flowers are allowed to grow so that there is adequate food for the bees.

Student 2: In Ireland, many ground-nesting birds like the curlew and the corncrake are facing extinction because of some farming methods which were introduced into Ireland from the 1970s onwards, especially, silage cutting which often destroyed eggs and chicks.

Student 3: In recent years we have become familiar that rewilding is an excellent way to heal ecosystems which have been destroyed by human activity. Rewilding our lawns or the lawn at the local Church will bring back insects such as bees, hoverflies, beetles which, in turn, will bring back more birds, all of which contributes to increasing biodiversity.

Principal: And so we listen to God's word.

Teacher: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. He said, "***Let the earth produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants, and fruit trees bearing fruit with their seeds inside, on the earth.***" ***And so it was. The earth produced vegetation: plants bearing seeds in their various kinds, and trees bearing fruit with their seed inside in their several kinds. God saw that it was good***".

The word of the Lord. ***Thanks be to God.***

Principal: We take a moment now in silence to appreciate the gift of nature around us and the gift we are to one another and can be to our natural world. (Music in the background would be helpful here – give this about 1 – 2 minutes).

Principal: And now we turn to God in prayer as we pray a prayer to bless this land and the flower seeds (or bulbs – depending on what you are using) we will sow here.

Student 1:

***Creator of the universe.
You are the giver and sustainer of life,
bringing forth the fruits of the earth
to feed and nourish you people.
We cultivate the land and sow the seed,
but you alone, Lord, can give the growth.
Let Your blessing lie upon this land, and the seeds we grow here.
Give us the grace to use Your gifts well,
Caring for the earth and all of your creatures,
Sharing the fruit of the earth with all so that
No one is hungry.
Our Father who is Lord of all, we praise you and we thank you. Amen.***

Student 2: These seeds represent hope; the hope that comes with new life and especially the hope we celebrate at Christmas. They represent our belief that God is at work in our lives and in the world. We pray that our faith in you and our faith in one another will increase. We pray that your love for us will inspire us to love each other and all of creation.

Principal: We will now plant our seeds/bulbs.

(Seed planting happens, with music)

Principal: We will now water these seeds. We pray a blessing on this water.

Student 3:

Creator of the universe,

You bless us today and always with all that you have made.

We pray a blessing on this water that will nourish these seeds and give them life.

Water means life and it means hope.

Lord, you are the water of life, you changed water to wine in Cana, with water you washed your disciples feet and from your side water and blood flowed on Calvary.

In this water today, may we always be reminded of your friendship and your care for us.

In this water today, may we always be reminded of your call to love others and to serve others.

In this water today, may we be reminded of our baptism.

Lord, bless this water and the seeds which are nourished by it.

Our Father, who is Lord of all, we praise you and we thank you.

(Watering of plants/seeds, with music).

Principal: In a few short months, these seeds will appear and we will be blessed with a beautiful garden here. Where once there was nothing, there will be new life. What does this mean for our school?

Pupil 3: These plants and flowers are a symbol of our commitment to be people of hope; people who believe that after Winter, comes Spring, people who believe that together we can get through difficult times, people who believe in God's love for us and for all of creation. These flowers are also a symbol of our desire to care for all of creation; from the tiniest of insects to the biggest of your creatures, they all matter to you and they are all part of the incredibly complex web of life that sustains us all. Hope and our commitment to nature are symbolised today in our planting of these seeds.

Principal: We turn now to you in prayer as we come to the end of our prayer service.

Student 4: Our response is *Lord graciously hear us*

For our school community, we have gotten through these last few months because we have worked together and stayed strong together. Thank you Lord for blessing us with one another. Lord hear us

For our families who have supported us over these last months. Thank you Lord for the gift of family. Lord hear us.

For the holidays ahead. May the weeks we've off be a time of real joy and peace for everyone. Lord hear us.

Principal: And so we conclude our prayer, with a blessing:

May the Lord bless you all today and always.

May he make his face shine upon you and

Show you his Love.

May you love all those you meet

And serve those who need you now and always.

May you find joy in the beauty of the natural world

And remember as Pope Francis tells us, that we are sisters and brothers to all

Of God's creatures too.

And may you go into your Christmas break full of hope and joy and may that hope and joy

Sustain you all the days of your life.

AMEN.

