Advent 2016: 
In Praise of Light

... All praise be Yours, my Lord, through all that You have made. And first, my Lord, Brother Sun... Francis of Assisi
Advent Reflections 2016: In Praise of Light

This Advent material focuses on the gifts of L/light and energy. The following reflections are intended to help individuals and groups deepen their appreciation of the power, warmth, passion, and mystery of fire and light this Advent season as we prepare to celebrate the presence of the Light of the World!

Directions for convener:
Adapt this material in any way that will be helpful for the group. Assign readers as suits the group. Pause to discuss questions. Create a centerpiece with a large candle. Ask each participant to bring a vigil or small candle; have extras just in case. (If possible, avoid paraffin, a petroleum product that causes pollution, and instead use beeswax. Beeswax candles don't pollute, smell good, are cost-efficient because of burning time, and support healthy bee colonies and beekeepers.)

Make copies for each participant using both sides of sustainable paper,. Have name cards for each. If participants are absent, put their names by the center circle to keep them in mind and prayer. When music is used, be creative to avoid printing copies.

Possible music for use any week:
"Christ, Circle Round Us," Dan Schutte
"Come, Lord Jesus," M.D. Ridge
"All Is Light," Jan Novotka, on Awakening Consciousness (www.JanNovotka.com)
"Let Us Bear Your Holy Light," Kathy Sherman, on A Language of the Heart (www.ministryoftheheart.org)

Week One: Prepare to view Journey of the Universe trailer (under 3 minutes) or 10 - 15 minutes of the video (www.JourneyoftheUniverse.org). Participants might want to borrow the DVD and watch the entire 56 minutes at home during Advent.

Week Three: Prepare a video or DVD on fracking such as "Time for an Energy Change" (13 min.) at http://ecospiritualityresources.com/media or DVD, available for $9 from terrishcj@aol.com.

Scripture is from New Revised Standard Version
Produced by Terri MacKenzie, SHCJ, who thanks Nancy Frommelt, OSF, Terry Moran, Thomas J. Murphy, Ph.D., and all past participants.
First Week of Advent: First Light

World AIDS Day, Dec. 1 • Women Martyrs of El Salvador, Dec. 2 • St. Nicholas, Dec. 6

I. Introduction
Each introduces him/herself. Settle any necessary decisions (e.g., refreshments, timing). Scan material. Note dates above. Light candles. Remember the presence of God: breathing, music, and/or whatever assists the group to become recollected. Pray to be attentive to the Spirit everywhere; pray for those using this resource in many countries. Someone read the Scripture excerpt:

. . . the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. . . .

Rom. 13:12

Silent reflection followed by sharing: What are your feelings about Advent? What "night is far gone" for you, or what night would you like to be gone? Extinguish candles.

II. Input
To better understand Light, we need, first, simple awareness. Electricity deprives us of an experience that billions of humans back through time have shared: gazing in awe at the Milky Way Galaxy, our home. If you can remember when you first noticed the stars — or a memorable sighting — share when it was and where you were. What was your reaction? Why? What were your questions as you looked?

Those who live in cities do not have ample darkness to see the sweep of stars; some have never seen the Milky Way. Most recently, scientists have learned that the observable universe began 13.82 billion years ago, a single immense energy event. Within our expanding Universe with its billions of galaxies is our Milky Way Galaxy. Within this galaxy is our solar system, and within it is our Sun, a star about a million times the size of Earth. It is one of the trillions of stars in one of the billions of galaxies in an intrinsically interconnected universe.

"We see the same sun that our fathers [and mothers] saw and yet we understand it in a much more magnificent way," wrote Teilhard de Chardin. Each second our Sun transforms four million tons of itself into light when it is converted into radiant energy that soars away in all directions. With the Sun, we have a new understanding of the cosmological meaning of sacrifice. Each second it gives part of itself over to become energy that we eat at each meal and use for energy; it is reborn as the vitality of Earth.
For millions of years, humans and other creatures have been basking in its warmth and feasting on its energy stored in the form of seeds, nuts, and berries. The actual energy coursing through our circulatory and nervous systems was bestowed upon us by the Sun.

Take a moment to study this image of Earth in relation to our Sun. As Earth rotates, Sun remains relatively steady, and we realize that current knowledge causes the terms "sunrise" and "sunset" to be outdated and obsolete. Point to the direction in which you/Earth are turning.

According to Neil Douglas-Klotz, "heaven" in Aramaic is not a place, but the image of "the light and sound shining through all creation." How might that affect the "where" of God?

Many poets have connected light with divinity. Below is a segment of "Choruses from The Rock," T.S. Eliot's reflection about light. Read it silently several times. Then share: How do you react to the image of God as Light? Why? After sharing, someone read the poem out loud.

_O Light Invisible, we praise Thee!
Too bright for mortal vision.
_O Greater Light, we praise Thee for the less:
The eastern light our spires touch at morning,
The light that slants on our western doors at evening,
The twilight over stagnant pools at batfly,
Moon light and star light, owl and moth light,
Glow-worm glowlight on a grassblade.
_O Light Invisible, we worship Thee!

III. Suggestions for this week: Use your candle at home to remind you of God's Light within. Before or after meals, give thanks for "the Greater Light," for the Light of Christ, for our Sun, for the sunshine we eat, the sunshine that energizes the molecules in our bodies. Next week, bring your candle and any quote about Light from Scripture.

IV. Closing:
Watch a segment of _Journey of the Universe_. Allow a few minutes to share reactions. Arrange borrowing if any desire to see it all.

Socialize.
Second Week of Advent: Christ Light

Mary's Conception, Dec. 8 • International Human Rights Day, Dec. 10
Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 12 • St. Lucy, Dec. 13

I. Introduction
Introduce any new participants. Note dates above. Light candles. Share light quotes from Scripture. Remember the presence of God whatever way assists the group to become recollected. Pray to be attentive to the Spirit everywhere. Someone read the Scripture excerpt:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and lion and fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Isaiah 11:6

Silent reflection followed by sharing: What is your reaction to that reading? Extinguish candles.

II. Input
Fire and light have held mystery since the beginning of time. Fire has purified and made sacred. It has symbolized immortality, the Spirit of God, and a passionate love of life and people. Light has long been an important metaphor and title for Jesus. One Advent antiphon begins "O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice . . . ." Many Christmas carols and hymns celebrate Jesus' presence as the one who gives light. What are your favorites? What Scripture quotes include Jesus' talking about light?

The "enfleshing" of divine light is called "Incarnation." Within our lifetimes, many sciences have shown how interconnected all life is. Theologians have realized that God's presence did not "come down" when Jesus was born but, rather, that divine presence is "enfleshed" in all creation. Jesus' history, as is true for each of us, is webbed with Earth's. Of course, the divine presence in Jesus is complete, yet the divine is present in all life. Nothing, including Jesus' life, can be separated from the rest of creation; it all manifests divinity.

"The incarnation begins . . . with the very first act of God . . . the first creative moment of our world. The incarnation is a process moving through the history of our created world . . . We are finding out more about the incarnation than ever before." Kenan B. Osborne, OFM

"The divinity is so intimately present in the world that the world can be regarded as an incarnate expression of the Trinity, as creative, as expansive, as conscious, as self-realizing and self-sharing." Beatrice Bruteau.
"The energy of the earth in living plants and animals and human beings is unified by the Incarnate Word. Incarnation was not . . . an afterthought, but, rather, the ground and goal of the movement of the entire world process." Albert. C. Fritsch, SJ.

God and the world are not identical (pantheism), but "the world is immanent with, and present to, God even as God is immanent within, and present to, the world." John Cobb

Sunlight helps banish dark moods (seasonal affective disorder). How might "basking" in the light of Jesus' life and lessons also brighten our moods?

The light of Jesus' teaching and example in the Gospels caused a transformation in Earth's evolution. "We can finally see straight, see what we are doing, where we are going, and really see the faces of those who are making the journey with us. . . . We can also see now what should not be done to others, what should not happen to animals and the earth. . . ." Wendy Cotter, CSJ

God lives and acts in us as well as in our entire world. God's covenant with all creation (Genesis 9: 9-11) requires our active participation in caring for our sacred Earth. What disrespect for creation concerns you?

Madeleine L'Engle has another insight on the meaning of incarnation: "To paint a picture or to write a story or to compose a song is an incarnational activity. The artist is a servant who is willing to be a birth giver. In a very real sense the artist should be like Mary who, when the angel told her that she was to bear the messiah, was obedient to the command. . . ." What have you created that can thus be seen as incarnational? How can your creativity extend the light of Christ?

III. Suggestions for this week:

On the next sunny day, stop to realize how large is Earth, that the Sun is a million times larger, and that the light you see took eight minutes to reach Earth. Discern your decisions in the light of Jesus' teaching and example. Pray to Jesus as Light and as giver of insight.

IV. Closing:

Sit reflectively in darkness for several minutes. Use the Flame Meditation on pp. 7-8.

Socialize.
Flame Meditation
adapted from John Surette, SJ

Light the center and individual candle(s).

Leader: A reflection on the Divine Dynamic, the relationship between humans, the Earth, and the creative power of the Universe.

Take turns reading:

_all things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being through him was life and the life was the life of all people._ John 1: 3

Let the flame evoke the memory of the primordial creation event some billions of years ago, when out of a fertile nothingness a great fire billowed out in all directions. Our Universe was born then. God's Word was spoken there. The Divine Artist was at work there. It was an art show to surpass all art shows. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame with its heat evoke within us the memory of the intense heat of a star that exploded some several billion years ago, giving birth to our sun and from the scraps of that birth our beautiful blue-green Earth. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us a memory of Earth some four and a half billion years ago, when it was a lava-like fiery ball of molten rock in the sky that over time formed a crust upon which we stand today. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us the memory of the earliest humans, who sat around their own fires and gazed into their own flickering flames while their shadows danced behind them on the cave walls. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke with us the memory of that burning bush before which Moses stood, with his shoes off and his knees shaking, experiencing the Divine Dynamic calling him to the cutting edges of his life. You and I were being loved there.
Let the flame evoke within us the memory of those fires on the hillsides and lakesides of Galilee, around which the rabbi Jesus sat instructing his disciples. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame evoke within us the memories of our parents and grandparents who sat before their fireplaces, wood stoves, lanterns and candles while they dreamed great dreams for their children. You and I were being loved there.

Let the flame make us aware of the fire that burns deep within us, a fire that embraces us with all our successes and failures, hopes and fears, joys and anxieties, good moments and not so good ones. It is a divine love that invites us to move confidently and creatively into our preferred future, the future of our Earth and the future of our whole Universe.

. . . . .

Reflection time.

Optional sharing.

Close by praying together:

Empower me, Great God of Life,
to fully live each day.
To shape my share of radiant light with joyful care,
and tend the fires of your reflection everywhere.

adapted from "Matins," Terri MacKenzie, SHCJ
(http://ecospiritualityresources.com/media)

Extinguish candles.
I. Introduction
Share anything relevant from the past week. Note dates above. Light candles. Allow time . . . .

*The Lord is my Light and my Salvation.* Ps. 27:1
*We have seen a great light.* Isaiah 9:1


II. Input

What is the darkest dark you have experienced? Darkness and light are complementary parts of creation. Life forms in the dark womb, most seeds grow in darkness, darkness facilitates sleep. Stars always shine, but we need darkness to see them. The Romans celebrated the coming of winter, when the sun's rays hit Earth obliquely in the Northern Hemisphere, on Dec. 25 (Julian Calendar). Think of aspects of our Christmas story that include the presence or absence of light.

"If I pray for the light, I need to remember that light isn’t sentimental. It illuminates the smiling infant and the wormy corpse, every broken promise and every act of faith." Sy Safransky

Carl Jung alerted us to positive and negative "shadow sides" within everyone. Somehow it seems easier to find dark shadows in others! What we dislike in others is sometimes a signal that the disliked aspects are in ourselves. "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. This procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not very popular." Carl Jung

Even organizations and countries have shadow sides. It is unpleasant to discover that qualities disliked in other countries and groups exist within our own groups and nation. It takes courage to face up to the gifts of the shadow and become increasingly enlightened. Surely this is the gift of the Light of Christ! Can you think of group or national examples of negative shadow sides, often denied? (Optional: What about personal examples?)

There is "real brokenness and darkness in human nature due to sin. Compulsive greed and chronic indifference are the two great obstacles to a healthy relationship with Creation." Keith D. Warner, OFM. We need to connect the ecological dimension of sin with lifestyles that are
"robbing from the underdeveloped world and from nature's ability to restore itself." How do you respond to this?

The sun's ancient carbon dioxide (CO₂) is stored in fossil fuels: coal, oil, gas. Starting with the Industrial Revolution, amounts of CO₂ have constantly risen. Excessive releasing of it by mining, manufacturing, transporting, and using fossil fuels harms all of creation (especially people living in poverty) by changing the balance of chemicals in our atmosphere. Hydraulic fracturing of natural gas and mining tar sands threaten water as well as air and cause multiple problems. Even if spills, contamination of resources, political and noise pollution could be avoided, global warming is inevitably worsened by them. Don't let industry ads fool you!

Developing renewable energies provides new jobs, lessens climate change, lowers pollution, and prevents health problems that result from fossil fuel use. Transitioning to renewable energy sources — wind, sun, biomass — is now possible for individuals and groups in several countries. (In the U.S., search for Alternate Electrical Supply Services and your zip code.) Energy efficiency also reduces carbon emissions. For example, compact fluorescent lights (CFLs) and LEDs cost more initially (sticker price), but they last longer and use less energy. Thus their true cost is less than incandescent bulbs.

III. Suggestions for this week:
Contact one legislator and ask what s/he is doing to support renewable and sustainable energy. Thank him/her for efforts. (How will you remember to do this?) Try an “electric fast” for a period of time this week (e.g., one hour) during which you use no TV or computer. Use the time for Advent reflection and/or to be with family. If desired, plan a simple party for next week's socializing.

IV. Closing
See "Time for an Energy Change" (13 min.) http://ecospiritualityresources.org/media/ or other material that explains fracking, the damage it causes, and what is being done to stop it.
Socialize.
Fourth Week of Advent: Light Within
Christmas Eve, Dec. 24 • Christmas Day, Dec. 25

I. Introduction
Share anything relevant from the past week. Light candles. Allow time . . . .

*Today a great light has come upon the Earth.* Gospel

*Acclamation*

*The Light shines in the darkness.* . . . John 1:5

*You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine . . .* Matthew 5: 14, 16

Silent reflection followed by sharing: Into what darkness do you especially hope the light of Christ will shine? Extinguish candles.

II. Input — Take a few minutes to reflect and share after each paragraph:

Gary Zukav: "The Light that flows through your system [and all living beings] is Universal Energy. It is the Light of the Universe. You [and every other creature] give Light form. What you feel, what you think, how you behave, what you value and how you live your life reflect the way you are shaping the Light that is flowing through you." What does this mean to you?

Hildegard of Bingen, Rhineland mystic, wrote about 900 years ago: "There is no creature that does not have a radiance, be it greenness or seed, blossom or beauty. It could not be creation without it. If God had not the power to thus empower, the light to thus enlighten, where, then, would all creation be?" What does this mean to you?

John Muir: "The sun does not shine on us, but in us." Who or what is "us"?

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ: "Throughout my whole life, during every minute of it, the world has been gradually lighting up and blazing before my eyes until it has come to surround me, entirely lit up from within." If you have ever had the experience of seeing the world or any part of it, “entirely lit up from within” and wish to share, please do.

Thomas Merton: "At the center of our being is a point of . . . nothingness and of absolute poverty. [It] is the pure glory of God in us . . . It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billion points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely." Name any specific situation that would improve with this insight.
Rachel Naomi Remen, MD: "Every time anyone becomes more transparent to the light in them, they will restore the light in the world." How can that be possible?

This holiday season, as we celebrate the light of Christ, remember the billions of years that preceded Jesus' birth. What role do you imagine the sun, stars, and moon played in his life?

Light — our light — is needed to clarify dangers to our Earth; our action is needed to protect it. What we do to lessen carbon dioxide contributes positively. In the U.S., about 70% of oil is used for transportation. How can individuals reduce and conserve energy? (E.g., some take public transportation; use bicycles; drive under 60 MPH saves gas; avoid idling, which wastes gas and money, and adds to pollution; turn lights and electrical equipment off when not needed; unplug any unused electronics to avoid "vampire energy" loss. How does/could your conservation of energy help you to appreciate God’s gifts?

III. Suggestions for this week
Let the Christmas lights on trees and homes remind you to be grateful for the Light of Christ. Watch for "light" references during Christmas and holiday Masses.

IV. Closing
Light the center candle. Pause quietly to remember people or other beings whose light influenced your life. If you care to, share with the group how that person or being enlightened your life. When all who wish to share have done so, close by silently reading, and then saying together, this prayer adapted from John O'Donohue:

Loving Source of all light, may our thoughts find their way into words which have the weight of shadow to hold the layers of truth. May we never place our trust in minds claimed by empty light, where one-sided certainties are driven by false desire. When we look into our hearts, may our eyes have the kindness and reverence of candlelight. May we always find you living and acting in us and in our world. Amen.

Using any gesture that you are comfortable using, thank each participant for the light s/he shared during these weeks.

Evaluation:
- Share one word that sums up this four-week experience for you. Why?
- Pause to remember anything from these weeks that you feel called to incorporate into your life.
- If you have suggestions for anything that could be changed or added in these pages for future use, please inform terrishcj@aol.com. Thank you!

Socialize.