

## [Spirituality](#)



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December 13, 2025

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Soon I will pull out my candy thermometers, my double boiler saucepot and my biggest kettle with its thick bottom of triple-ply copper, aluminum and stainless steel and assemble the ingredients to make caramels.

Christmas is coming, so I will stand at my stove, wooden spoon in hand, stirring cream and sugar and prayer together. Everyone else calls them my Christmas caramels, but over the nearly 40 years that I've been making large batches of these creamy caramels as holiday treats for friends and family, I've come to think of them as my Advent caramels.

Candy making and the Incarnation of Christ may not seem to be closely connected but, like the season of Advent itself, making caramels has become, for me, a lesson in how to wait, how to hope, how to have faith. Caramel making teaches some of the lessons that Advent wants me to learn. Wait patiently. Stay hopeful. Focus on what's coming. Pray often.

## **Creamy Advent Caramels**

3 cups heavy whipping cream

2/3 cup (1/2 of a 14 oz. can) sweetened condensed milk

2 cups sugar

2 cups light corn syrup

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 cup walnuts, broken (optional)

2 teaspoons vanilla

Combine whipping cream and sweetened condensed milk in the top of a double boiler saucepan. Heat until warm and keep mixture warm over hot water. In a large heavy saucepan, mix sugar, syrup and salt and cook to boiling over medium high heat using a wooden spoon to dissolve sugar. Cook 1 minute more after a rolling boil is reached.

Begin to add warm cream mixture to syrup mixture, 1/4 cup at a time, stirring for 3 minutes after addition. Cook over medium heat until mixture reaches 242 degrees or soft ball candy stage. This will take 45 minutes or more. Add vanilla and nuts, if using, and stir into caramel. Quickly pour caramel into a buttered 9x9-inch, or larger, pan. Let cool before cutting caramels into small squares and wrapping each in waxed paper.

I cannot adequately prepare for the feast of the Nativity of Christ if I am too distracted by the chaos and clatter and consumerism of the holiday season. If I do not stay in the spiritual season of Advent, I cannot celebrate Christmas the way I want to. Somehow, making caramels has become part of that process — because you cannot make sugar and heavy whipping cream and corn syrup coalesce into a creamy caramel confection unless there is plenty of patience and prayer involved.

So I try to slow down, knowing that the chemistry of candy making, like the coming of Christ, cannot be rushed. It will take the time it takes. And I have learned not to attempt my usual habits of multitasking while in the kitchen. Instead, I choose a time without interruptions. I turn off my phone; I tune into the sounds of Gregorian chants or my favorite Advent hymns playing softly in the background; and I spend some time finding God with a big wooden spoon in my hand.

The only way to make truly great caramel is to add cream in very small amounts to a potful of hot sugar syrup and then stir and stir and stir some more after each addition. While I stir, I go through the people on my prayer list and offer what I can for each of them — at least a Hail Mary or two.

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My family is huge: six children, 19 grandchildren, siblings, in-laws, nieces and nephews too numerous to count. So my prayer list is large, too. The priorities change every year and this Advent I will add a friend with a terrible cancer diagnosis, a family member struggling through a divorce and a neighbor who is newly widowed to the list.

The seemingly never-ending process of stirring and boiling and stirring and boiling, while I wait for heat and time to transform sugar and cream into something else entirely, tells me to wait — if often impatiently — for Christ to appear in all these human struggles, too.

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Like all good Christmas traditions, my caramels have come to define the season for my children and grandchildren. I no longer remember the exact year I began doing it, but caramels are a gift-giving staple that I have faithfully produced every year for decades now. I made them the year my father died during Advent. I made them the year my first marriage ended. I made them no matter how busy life was with work or family or holiday-induced stresses.

Over those years, I have learned to trust the process and keep my focus on the end result, both the coming of Christ into the world as a baby in a manger and achieving caramel perfection at exactly 242 degrees Fahrenheit.

For that, prayer — and a good candy thermometer — will always be an essential part of my Advent season.