

Symbols and Traditions of Advent

Timothy McCanna



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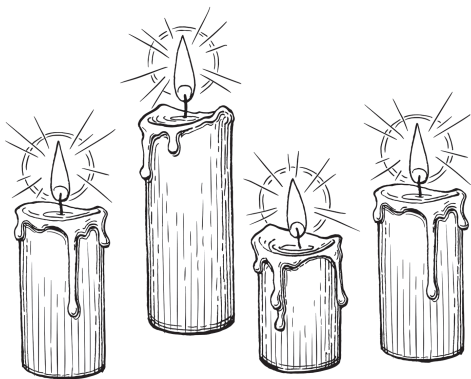
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Contents

Introduction.....	5
Why Advent?.....	7
The Advent Wreath	9
Advent Vesper Service	11
Advent Reconciliation Service.....	13
The O Antiphons	14
Advent Liturgical Readings.....	16
The Jesse Tree	18
The Giving Tree.....	20
The Christmas Tree.....	21
The Creche	24
The Feast of Saint Nicholas	26
Midnight Mass	27
Conclusion.....	28
Advent Prayer.....	29

The symbols of Advent are the creations of believing Christians who have prepared for and celebrated the birth of Christ over the ages.



Introduction

Advent prepares us for Christmas, which is all about the Incarnation—God joining us, taking on human flesh, actually becoming human. All of creation is touched in the Incarnation. Catholics believe that creation, though wounded by original sin, remains an indicator of the presence of God in the world. Through our use of sacraments and sacramentals we witness to our belief that creation can lead us closer to God. We use natural elements and objects, such as water, bread, wine, oil, candles, statues, stained glass windows, and beads (to mention just a few) to help us focus and celebrate our relationship with God. During the season of Advent, many of these natural elements and objects assist us in preparing for the birth of Christ. We will look at the signs and symbols that our Church uses during this season, as well as some that come from our cultural inheritances.

Why Advent?

Advent as we know it today developed many centuries after Jesus' life on earth. Because of the number of persons being baptized in the early Church, a practice developed of having another time for baptism besides just the Easter Vigil. Since Lent served as a time of preparation for baptism, a month before Christmas was set aside as a time for that same kind of preparation. Thus the weeks leading up to Christmas became a time of penance and preparation. That is the source of the penitential aspect of Advent. Combined with this penitential practice, of course, was the preparation for Christmas. Still very clear in the readings for Sundays and weekdays during Advent, this time of preparation in the early Church recalled the centuries of longing for the coming of the Messiah, the conception of John the Baptist, and the family history of Mary and Joseph. Today, the writings of the prophet Isaiah are featured dur-

ing Advent because they so eloquently speak of Israel's longing for salvation.

Among the special signs and symbols the Church uses today to recall and enter into these central parts of our Christian heritage are the Advent wreath, vespers, reconciliation services, the O Antiphons, Scripture readings, the Jesse tree, the giving tree, the Christmas tree, the creche, gift giving, and of course, Midnight Mass.

The Advent Wreath



One of the most common symbols used during Advent is the Advent wreath, usually made of evergreen branches formed into a circle. It holds four candles: three purple (or

dark blue) and one pink. The three purple candles symbolize the time of preparation, and are lit at the beginning of the first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent. The pink candle, lit at the beginning of the third week of Advent, is the Church's way of giving us a break. There is a similar Sunday in Lent. Both of these days, within penitential seasons, focus on rejoicing. It is the Church's way of lifting us up within a serious time of repentance and penance to remind us that the battle has been won by Jesus' death and Resurrection. The first

word of the liturgy on these occasions (Gaudete Sunday and Laetare Sunday) is “Rejoice.”

The Advent wreath is lit in church at the beginning of each of the Sunday Masses on the four Sundays of Advent. Each week one more candle is lit and prayers are said to correspond to the liturgical theme of the week.

Many families make a small Advent wreath for use at home. Although the candles on the wreath in church are lit only on Sundays, the candles on the family’s wreath usually are lit each night of the week, accompanied with a variety of prayers or rituals. Some families place a white or light-colored candle in the middle of the Advent wreath on Christmas Eve to symbolize the coming of the Christ Child. This candle symbolizes the connection between the Old and the New Testament. Whatever is chosen, prayers and rituals should be appropriate and relevant to all members of the family.

Advent Vesper Service



Most churches celebrate an Advent vesper service, a special liturgy centering on our expectation of Jesus coming into our midst as the Light of the World. The vesper prayer is usually

celebrated at dusk, as day is turning into night, and proclaims that the darkness of night will not conquer the light of Jesus. The service usually consists of singing the O Antiphons (often with the song “O Come, O Come Emmanuel”), lighting of the Easter candle and the Advent wreath, and reading of Scripture, primarily from the prophets proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. Because Christian tradition holds that the ecclesiastical day begins at sunset in accord with Genesis 1:5 (“And there was evening and there was morning,