

The Liturgical Seasons of the Catholic Church



ADVENT



"Let every heart prepare Him room."

"Stay awake, be ready - You do not know the hour that the Lord shall come."

Advent has a twofold character:

as a season to prepare for Christmas when the Messiah's first coming to us is remembered; Jesus' birth as a baby is celebrated.
as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to be alert and await Christ's Second Coming at the end of time as King and Judge.

We hear the word 'advent' quite a lot every December – today usually attached to the word 'calendar' and with the promise of chocolate attached! But what does one have to do with the other?

Advent is the first season in the Church Year- the start of the Christian year. It is the period of time is the four weeks before Christmas. The First Sunday of Advent is the Church's New Year's Day. It begins on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew the Apostle (November 30th: four Sundays before Christmas) and ends on December 24th. It can fall on any date between 27th November and 3rd December. When Christmas Day is a Monday, Advent Sunday will fall on its latest possible date.

(* In the Ambrosian Rite and the Mozarabic Rite of the Catholic Church, Advent begins on the sixth Sunday before Christmas, the Sunday after St. Martin's Day (11th November.))

The word 'advent' in Old English, derives from Latin 'adventus' meaning 'arrival', 'approach' or 'coming': from French advenire, from ad- 'to' + venire 'come': The Latin word adventus is also the translation of the Greek word parousia, commonly used to refer to the Second Coming of Christ. The term "Advent" is also used in Eastern Orthodoxy for the 40-day Nativity Fast, which has practices different from those in the West: it differs in length and observances, and does not begin the liturgical church year as it does in the West. The Eastern Nativity Fast does not use the equivalent parousia in its preparatory services.

It is the period of time immediately before Christmas when Christians get ready to celebrate Jesus' birth: it is a period to reflect on God's coming to Earth. During this time, Christians remember when God came over 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus. For thousands of years the world had waited for the coming of the Messiah to redeem and to save the human race, restoring mankind's relationship to God. Christian's experience this same longing for the coming of the Messiah during Advent. Spiritually, they long for the coming of Christ into their hearts as the Holy Spirit draws them into an ever deepening relationship with Him; But they also anticipate and look forward to the time when He will come again in his Second Coming, when He will return physically to earth - as He promised - to restore all things to Himself: Advent connects Christians spiritually with God's whole plan of redemption through Jesus Christ.

So it is a season of,

- Hopeful longing
- Joyful expectation and waiting
- Prayerful penance
- Spiritual preparation

It looks to the celebration of,

- the ancient longing and salvation history of the past, (the coming of the Messiah through the Nativity of Jesus in the flesh in Bethlehem at Christmas)
- our present redemption being accomplished, in our hearts daily
- the future coming of Christ (the return of Jesus at the Second Coming in glory at the end of time)





It is impossible to claim with confidence when Advent began or to find a credible explanation of the origin of Advent. According to Saint Gregory of Tours the novelty of the celebration of Advent began in the fifth century when the then Bishop Perpetuus (later a Saint), who died in 490, directed that starting with the feast of St. Martin, 11th November until Christmas, one fasts three times per week should be carried out, so it was certainly in existence from about 480. This practice remained limited to the diocese of Tours until the sixth century.

In the 6th century, local councils enjoined fasting on all days except Saturdays and Sundays from Saint Martin's Day to Epiphany, a period of 56 days, but of 40 days fasting, like the fast of Lent. It was therefore called Quadragesima Sancti Martini (Saint Martin's Lent). This period of fasting was later shortened (The Council of Tours of 567) and called "Advent" by the Church. But because Advent is known as the "little Lent," prayer, alms, and sacrifices are also a part of Advent season.

The Macon Council held in 581 adopted the practice in Tours and soon all France observed three days of fasting a week from the feast of Saint Martin until Christmas. The most devout worshipers in some countries exceeded the requirements adopted by the Council of Macon, and fasted every day of Advent. The homilies of Gregory the Great in the late sixth century showed four weeks to the liturgical season of Advent, but without the observance of a fast. However, under Charlemagne in the ninth century, writings claim that the fast was still widely observed.

In the thirteenth century, the fast of Advent was not commonly practised although, according to Durand of Mende, fasting was still generally observed. As quoted in the bull of canonisation of St. Louis, the zeal with which he observed this fast was no longer a custom observed by Christians of great piety. It was then limited to the period from Saint Andrew until Christmas Day, since the solemnity of this Apostle was more universal than that of St. Martin. When Pope Urban V ascended the papal seat in 1362, he simply forced people in his court to abstinence but there was no question of fasting. It was then customary in Rome to observe five weeks of Advent before Christmas. The Roman Catholic Church later abolished the precept of fasting (at an unknown date at the latest in 1917) but kept Advent as a season of penitence. In addition to fasting, dancing and similar festivities were forbidden in these traditions. On Rose Sunday, relaxation of the fast was permitted. So, the liturgy of Advent remained unchanged until the Second Vatican Council (1963) introduced minor changes, differentiating the Spirit of Lent from that of Advent, emphasising Advent as a Season of Hope for Christ's coming, and now as a promise of His Second Coming. Hence the theme of readings and teachings during Advent often reflect this preparation for the Second Coming of the Messiah as judge, while also commemorating the First Coming of Christ at Christmas as Saviour. Church traditions vary in the relative importance of penitence and expectation during the weeks in Advent globally.

Traditions of the Advent Season.

Many Advent customs involve counting the days down until Christmas begins. As each day unfolds in Advent, Christians are challenged to reflect on God's old promise to come and rescue His people, and think again about what Jesus, Emmanuel, 'God with us', really means to them.

Churches have always 'dressed' for Advent, since approximately the 13th century, the usual liturgical colour in Western Christianity for Advent has been violet; Pope Innocent III declared black to be the proper colour for Advent, though Durandus of Saint-Pourçain claimed violet had preference over black. So the violet or purple colour is often used for hangings around the church, the vestments of the clergy, and often also the tabernacle. However, on some occasions that are heavily associated with Advent, such as the Rorate Mass (but not on Sundays), white is used. On the third Sunday of Advent, Gaudete Sunday, rose may be used instead, referencing the rose used on Laetare Sunday, the fourth Sunday of Lent. A rose coloured candle on the Advent Wreath in Western Christianity is referenced as a sign of joy (Gaudete). (In some Christian denominations, blue, a colour representing hope, is an alternative liturgical colour for Advent. This colour is often referred to as "Saron blue." During the Nativity Fast, red is used by Eastern Christianity, although gold is an alternative colour.)

It is also custom to make a special celebration of the Advent Saint Feast Days: In addition to St. Andrew's feast day on November 30th - the Advent kickoff - there are other saints with feast days during Advent that have special cultural traditions associated with them. St. Nicholas Day on December 6th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception (a Holy Day of Obligation) on December 8th, Our Lady of Guadalupe Feast Day on December 12th, and St. Lucy's feast day on December 13th (celebrated especially in Sweden and Italy.)

Other practices associated with Advent include keeping an Advent calendar, lighting an Advent wreath, praying an Advent daily devotional or other prayers, music, celebrating with Advent Dinners, preparing seasonal foods (e.g. cakes and mince pies), erecting and blessing a Christmas tree or a Christon tree, lighting a Christingle, making a Jesse Tree, going to a Penance Service, as well as other ways of preparing for Christmas, such as setting up Christmas decorations, a custom that is sometimes done liturgically through a hanging of the greens ceremony. Further, Nativity Sets or Cribs are a classic tradition and are great to display during the Advent Season. (Their origin is attributed to St Francis of Assisi.) To make the display especially poignant, people wait until Christmas Eve to place the Baby Jesus into the scene. The Vatican has a neat tradition of the Holy Father blessing the Baby Jesus from family nativity scenes, called 'Bambinelli Sunday.' This takes place on the third Sunday of Advent - Gaudete Sunday.

In many countries, as the first day of Advent heralds the start of the Christmas season, many people opt to erect their Christmas trees and put up their Christmas decorations on or immediately before Advent Sunday.

In the early 20th century, the first advent calendars were created as a way to look forward to the celebration of Christmas, thus it has become the most common observance of Advent outside church circles. Tradition recalls that one December a mother cut a cake into 24 pieces and put them onto a piece of cardboard. Her little boy got to eat one piece each day until Christmas. That little boy grew up to be a printer. He always remembered what his mother had done, and in 1903 he produced the first Advent Calendar. It had 24 little windows. Behind each window was a picture of something he had wished for as a child - mostly toys - although a religious version was also produced. The keeping of an advent calendar is replaced with an advent candle by some. So either with one door is opened in the calendar, or one section of the candle is burned, on each day in December leading up to Christmas Eve. Today, the pictures have been replaced with chocolates in some calendars.

Many Christians take part in 'Small Sacrifices for the Christ Child': Just as the Magi laboured through a long journey following a star to worship and give precious gifts to the Christ Child, so we can do the same; we can give the Baby Jesus our sacrifices during the Advent Season - fasting (the Nativity Fast or the Fast of December), praying, doing acts of kindness or charity to help those less fortunate by volunteering or raising money, feeding and clothing the homeless and refugees - for The Holy Family themselves were homeless that first Christmas and had to rely on an act of kindness! Adults can do this alone, but with children a visual aid can also be used. Two popular ways are Jesus Stockings and a Baby Jesus creche. For the stocking, small sacrifices are written on little slips of paper and placed into the stocking; for the creche, a piece of straw is added for each good deed. These add up each day of Advent as birthday presents for the newborn King. When Jesus is born, and the baby Jesus is placed in the manger, the prayers and sacrifices have prepared Him room in our hearts.

Many churches also hold special musical events, such as Nine Lessons and Carols and singing of Handel's Messiah oratorio. Also, the Advent Prose, an antiphonal plain song, may be sung. The "Late Advent Weekdays", 17-24 December, mark the singing of the Great Advent 'O antiphons'. These are the daily antiphons for the Magnificat at Vespers, or Evening Prayer, and mark the forthcoming birth of the Messiah. They form the basis for each verse of the popular Advent hymn, "O come, O come, Emmanuel".

During Advent, the Gloria of the Mass is omitted, so that the return of the angels' song at Christmas has an effect of novelty. Mass compositions written especially for Lent, such as Michael Haydn's Missa tempore Quadragesimae, in D minor for choir and organ, have no Gloria and so are appropriate for use in Advent.

In England, especially in the northern counties, there was a custom (now extinct) for poor women to carry around the "Advent images", two dolls dressed to represent Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary. A halfpenny coin was expected from every one to whom these were exhibited and bad luck was thought to menace the household not visited by the doll-bearers before Christmas Eve at the latest.

In Normandy, farmers employed children under twelve to run through the fields and orchards armed with torches, setting fire to bundles of straw, and thus it was believed driving out such vermin as were likely to damage the crops.

In Italy, among other Advent celebrations is the entry into Rome in the last days of Advent of the Calabrian pifferari, or bagpipe players, who play before the shrines of Mary, the mother of Jesus: in Italian tradition, the shepherds played these pipes when they came to the manger at Bethlehem to pay homage to the infant Jesus.

Since 2011, an Advent labyrinth consisting of 2500 tealights has been formed for the third Saturday of Advent in Frankfurt-Bornheim.

Another popular tradition is to make a Christingle (meaning 'Christ's Light'), a symbol of the Christian faith. Once made Christingles can be exchanged for a gift of money. The money raised is then given to families in need. Originally from Germany, Christingles are made up of different parts, each one being there to remind us of something.

The orange represents the world.

The candle reminds us of Jesus, the Light of the World.

The red ribbon goes all round the 'world' and being the colour of blood, reminds us that Jesus died for us all.

The four cocktail sticks could have either of two meanings; the four seasons or the four corners of the world.

The sweets (or sometimes dried fruit and nuts) remind us of God's gifts to the world (the fruits of the earth) including kindness and love.

The foil is only there to catch waxy drips from the candle!



Canadians decorate the Christmas tree with 'Chrismons'. A Chrismon gets its name from a combination of two words: Christ and Monogram. The monograms are all symbols which relate in some way to Jesus Christ. Many of them were used by the first Christians to identify themselves to one another - a star, a fish, a lamb, a cross. They are made in colour combinations of white, gold and silver which symbolize the purity and majesty of the Son of God. The evergreen tree they hang on is a reminder of the eternal life which Jesus promises. Chrismons are made out of card or polystyrene, and decorated with paint, beads or glitter.

Another tradition is to make a Jesse Tree. Jesse Trees are a very old Christmas Tradition and first started in medieval times. They are used to help tell the story of the Bible from creation to the Christmas Story. The name comes from Jesse who was the Father of the great Jewish King David. One prophecy in the Bible, in the book of Isaiah 11:1-4, says:

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him-- the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD-- and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

A branch is a sign of new life and new beginnings. Jesus was a descendent of King David and Christians believe that Jesus is this new branch.

The first Jesse trees were large carvings, tapestries or even stained glass windows put in Churches that helped illiterate people (people who can't read or write) to learn about the Bible from Creation to the Christmas Story. But now Jesse Trees are used as a kind of Advent Calendar. You can use a normal Christmas tree or a banner in the shape of a tree. Each day through advent (or sometimes just on the four Sundays of Advent) a special decoration or ornament (similar to a Chrismon), that tells a story from the Bible, is hung on the tree.

(See Liturgical Year : Activities : Jesse Tree Instructions | Catholic Culture

<https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/liturgicalyear/activities/view.cfm?id=545>)

The Advent Wreath

During Advent no flowers decorate churches, but it is usual to have an Advent Crown also known as an Advent Wreath. There are many traditions surrounding the Advent Wreath and it has changed in appearance over the course of time but using ancient symbols there are some significant parts that remain constant: The wreath is traditionally a circular garland made up of evergreen branches (fir tree branches knotted with a red ribbon and decorated with pine cones, holly, laurel, and sometimes mistletoe.) The evergreen is a reminder that God does not change. The fir tree is a symbol of strength and laurel a symbol of victory over sin and suffering. The latter two, with the holly, do not lose their leaves, and thus represent the eternity of God – without beginning or end. The green colour is a sign of life and hope. For Christians, this crown is also the symbol of Christ the King, the holly recalling the crown of thorns resting on the head of Christ. The crown also symbolises victory, in addition to its round form evoking the sun (Light of the World) and its return each year. There are a number of candles added. The unlit candles represent the symbol of the struggle against darkness. Each of the candles represents people who prepared for the coming of Jesus and therefore the lighting of the candles helps Christians to prepare themselves for the Christmas festival. The flames of candles are the representation of the Christmas light approaching and bringing hope and peace. So it is also a time to prepare and look forward to the time when Jesus will one day return. The number four represents, in addition to the four weeks of Advent, the four seasons and the four cardinal virtues. The four candles added to the wreath crown symbolise, in one interpretation, the great stages of salvation before the coming of the Messiah; the first is the symbol of the forgiveness granted to Adam and Eve, the second is the symbol of the faith of Abraham and of the patriarchs who believe in the gift of the Promised Land, the third is the symbol of the joy of David whose lineage does not stop and also testifies to his covenant with God, and the fourth and last candle is the symbol of the teaching of the prophets who announce a reign of justice and peace. Or in another interpretation they symbolise the four stages of human history; creation, the Incarnation, the redemption of sins, and the Last Judgment.

The concept of the Advent wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th Century. However, it was not until three centuries later that the modern Advent wreath took shape. The modern Advent wreath, with its candles representing the Sundays of Advent, originated from an 1839 initiative by Johann Hinrich Wichern, a Protestant pastor in Germany and a pioneer in urban mission work among the poor. In view of the impatience of the children he taught as they awaited Christmas, he made a ring of wood, with nineteen small red tapers and four large white candles. Every morning a small candle was lit, and every Sunday a large candle. Custom later retained only the large candles. The keeping of an Advent wreath became a common practice in homes and churches. In the home, the Advent wreath was traditionally placed on a table with four candles or, without candles, on the front door of the house as a welcome sign.

Today the Advent wreath is adorned with different coloured candles, now usually there are four candles with a fifth one in the centre: three violet or purple, one pink, and one white. The first candle to be lit on the First Sunday of Advent is purple and then a new one is added to it every Sunday leading up to Christmas. In the order of purple, purple, pink, purple and finally white on Christmas Eve / Day. The pink candle being lit on the Third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudete Sunday, after the opening word of the entrance antiphon at Mass - Gaudete, meaning "Rejoice". The fifth candle (white), known as the Christ Candle, representing Jesus, Light of the World, is in the middle of the wreath, to be lit on Christmas Eve or Day to celebrate the arrival of the Son of God - a symbol of festivity and purity. In other traditions the four candles can be blue or red, with the centre one being white or gold.



Symbol	Meaning
Circle	Eternity of God
Evergreen Wreath	Life, immortality
Candle	Jesus is the light of the world.
4x Candles	Four weeks of Advent
3x Purple	Purple = prayer, penance, & preparation
1x Rose (Pink)	Rose = Rejoicing

Another tradition surrounding the meaning of the candles claims that the first purple candle represents God's people. This is the candle of hope. The second candle reminds people of the Old Testament prophets who foretold the birth of the Messiah. This is the candle of peace. The third candle is a symbol of John the Baptist and is known as the candle of joy. The fourth candle reminds us of Mary the mother of Jesus and that candle represents love.

Other variations of the themes celebrated on each of the four Sundays include:

- The Prophets' Candle - the Old Testament patriarchs who were Christ's ancestors, symbolizing hope; the Bethlehem Candle (the way) Christ's birth in a manger and other prophecies, symbolizing faith; the Shepherds' Candle, symbolizing joy; the Angel's Candle, symbolizing peace.
- Prophets—Angels—Shepherds—Magi
- Faithfulness—Hope—Joy—Love
- Faith—Prepare—Joy—Love

In the Roman Rite of the Catholic Church, the readings of Mass on the Sundays of Advent have distinct themes that relate to the candles:

On the First Advent Sunday, they look forward to the Second Coming of Christ.

On the Second Sunday, the Gospel reading recalls the preaching of John the Baptist, who came to "prepare the way of the Lord"; the other readings have associated themes.

On the Third Sunday (Gaudete Sunday - Philippians 4:1-4), the Gospel reading is again about John the Baptist, the other readings about the joy associated with the coming of the Saviour. It is celebrated with rose-coloured vestments similar to Laetare Sunday at the middle point of Lent.

On the Fourth Sunday, the Gospel reading is about the events involving Mary and Joseph - the annunciation of Christ's birth, while the other readings are related to these, so the candle may be known as the Angel's candle. The Magnificat or Song of Mary may be featured.