

The Advent Wreath

by Catherine Fournier at domestic-church.com

According to present usage, Advent is a period beginning with the Sunday nearest to the feast of St. Andrew the Apostle (30 November) and embracing four Sundays. The first Sunday may be as early as 27 November, and then Advent has twenty-eight days, or as late as 3 December, giving the season only twenty-one days.



With Advent the ecclesiastical year begins in the Western churches. During this time the faithful are admonished:

- to prepare themselves worthily to celebrate the anniversary of the Lord's coming into the world as the incarnate God of love,
- thus to make their souls fitting abodes for the Redeemer coming in Holy Communion and through grace, and
- thereby to make themselves ready for His final coming as judge, at death and at the end of the world."

From the Catholic Encyclopedia about Candles:

The word candle (candela, from *candeo*, to burn) was introduced into the English language as an ecclesiastical term, probably as early as the eighth century... We need not shrink from admitting that candles, like incense and lustral water, were commonly employed in pagan worship and in the rites paid to the dead. But the Church from a very early period took them into her service, just as she adopted many other things indifferent in themselves, which seemed proper to enhance the splendour of religious ceremonial.... They are, in fact, part of the natural language of mystical expression, and such things belong quite as much to secular ceremonial as they do to religion. The salute of an assigned number of guns, a tribute which is paid by a warship to the flag of a foreign power, is just as much or as little worthy to be described as superstitious as the display of an assigned number of candles upon the altar at high Mass.

The Advent Wreath is a simple way to honour Advent. By using the symbolic power of candles within the four weeks of Advent, we illustrate that Advent is a time of solemn preparation, that during this time, we are awaiting the Light of the Word and the Dawning of Hope.

Advent is a penitential season, just like Lent. We are called to fast, to pray, and to perform good works to prepare ourselves for the great Feast of Christmas. The liturgical colour of violet, or purple, symbolises humility and penitence. This is why the candles of the Advent Wreath are purple, with the exception of the third candle, which is rose, or pink. On the Third Sunday of Advent, the 'mood' lifts as the Church begins to look forward to the Coming of the Christ Child, and this joyful waiting is represented by the lighter colour of the candle and vestments.

Christ came to bring us Eternal Life. He promised that "the gates of Hell would not prevail against His Church" and "whatever was bound on Earth would be bound also in Heaven." This is why we use a circle of greenery for the Advent Wreath, the circle symbolises eternity (the same symbolism is used in wedding rings) and the greenery symbolises new life and our evergreen, ever growing, every living faith.

None of this symbolism has much to do with an Advent Wreath's place in the devotional activities of the family, of course. The powerful symbolic messages of candles and greenery are absorbed by the parents and children as a matter of course without much discussion. The observance of specific colours of the candles and their lighting become part of family tradition, which gains its own symbolic power over the years. The growing light of the wreath as more candles are lit each week amply demonstrates the faith message of the season without any more elaboration needed.

A visitor to our site contributed this insight: "I was told that (this is from a Catholic perspective) that the candle lit on the third week of Advent is a different color than the rest, because it stands as the sign that Light overcomes darkness. When the first two candles are lit there are still two dark, it is half and half, but when the third is lit Light wins!"

What is important in the family, is the activity of using the Wreath, together as a family. Every action, whether daily or devotional is layered upon every other action, building by imperceptible layers the character, faith and unity of the family. Clear, strong, simple, fruitful traditions build strong, faithful and fruitful families. The Advent Wreath is such a tradition. Enduring, clear, simple to use and to pass on to the generations.