

The Season of Advent in the Catholic Church

Meaning, Symbols, Time Period, and More



by

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In the Catholic Church, Advent is a period of preparation extending over the four Sundays before Christmas. The word Advent comes from the Latin *advenio*, "to come to," and refers to the coming of Christ. And the term the coming includes three references: first of all, to our celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas; second, to the coming of Christ in our lives through grace and the Sacrament of Holy Communion; and finally, to his second coming at the end of time.

Our preparations, therefore, should have all three comings in mind. We need to prepare our souls to receive Christ worthily.

First We Fast; Then We Feast

Advent has been called a "little Lent," because it traditionally has included a period of increased prayer, fasting, and good works. Although the Western Church no longer has a set requirement for fasting during Advent, the Eastern Church (both Catholic and Orthodox) continues to observe what is known as Philip's Fast, from November 15 until Christmas.

Traditionally, all great feasts have been preceded by a time of fasting, which makes the feast itself more joyful. Unfortunately, Advent today has supplanted by "the Christmas shopping season," so that by the time Christmas Day comes, many people no longer enjoy the feast or even specially mark the next 12 days of the Christmas season, which lasts until Epiphany (or, technically, the Sunday after Epiphany, being that the next season, called ordinary time, starts on the following Monday).

The Symbols of Advent

In its symbolism, the church continues to stress the penitential and preparatory nature of Advent. As during Lent, priests wear purple vestments, and the Gloria ("Glory to God") is omitted during Mass. The only exception is on the Third Sunday of Advent, known as Gaudete Sunday, when priests can wear rose-colored vestments. As on Laetare Sunday during Lent, this exception is designed to encourage us to continue our prayer and fasting, because we can see that Advent is more than halfway over.

The Advent Wreath

Perhaps the best-known of all Advent symbols is the Advent wreath, a custom that originated among German Lutherans but was soon adopted by Catholics. Consisting of four candles (three purple or blue and one pink) arranged in a circle with evergreen boughs (and often a fifth, white candle in the center), the Advent wreath corresponds to the

four Sundays of Advent. The purple or blue candles represent the penitential nature of the season, while the pink candle calls to mind the respite of Gaudete Sunday. The white candle, when used, represents Christmas.

Celebrating Advent

We can better enjoy Christmas—all 12 days of it—if we revive Advent as a period of preparation. Abstaining from meat on Fridays or not eating at all between meals is a good way to revive the Advent fast. (Not eating Christmas cookies or listening to Christmas music before Christmas is another.) We can incorporate customs such as the Advent wreath, the Saint Andrew Christmas Novena, and the Jesse Tree into our daily ritual, and we can set some time aside for special scripture readings for Advent, which remind us of the threefold coming of Christ.

Holding off on putting up the Christmas tree and other decorations is another way to remind ourselves that the feast is not here yet. Traditionally, such decorations were put up on Christmas Eve, and they would not be taken down until after Epiphany, in order to celebrate the Christmas season to its fullest.