

SYMBOLS OF ADVENT- By Fr. Pierre

'ADVENT' WITHIN THE LITURGICAL YEAR

'Advent' comes from the Latin word 'adventus', which means 'coming.' Advent is a liturgical season and a time of waiting and expectation, about 4 weeks in length, in preparation for the feast of Christmas. Advent is the first season of the Liturgical Year, which is followed by the seasons of Christmas, Lent, and Easter. There are 34 weeks of Ordinary Time, which fill in the gaps between the Liturgical seasons. Advent is closely related to Christmas, and cannot be considered apart from that feast. For Catholics, Advent is considered a time of spiritual preparation for the Christmas season. Among the special signs and symbols the Church uses to recall and enter into the Advent season, are the Advent wreath, reconciliation services, Scripture readings, the Jesse tree, the Angel tree, the Christmas tree, the crèche, gift giving, and Christmas 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: 3 purple and one pink. The three purple candles symbolize the time of preparation, and are lit at the beginning of the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Sundays of Advent. The pink candle, lit at the beginning of the 3rd week of Advent, is the Church's way of giving us a break. There is a similar day 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 white candle in the middle of the Advent wreath is lit on Christmas Eve, to symbolize the coming of Jesus (the 1st coming of Jesus as an infant, the 2nd coming of Jesus at the end of time, and the 3rd coming of Jesus, which takes place in the 'in-between time', in the here and now of our hearts). Families can make a small Advent wreath for use at home. As the appropriate number of candles are lit, an Advent prayer is said (included in this handout), followed by grace before the meal.

SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION DURING COVID-19

Advent has a penitential aspect, similar to Lent. We do penance to shake ourselves free from our attachments to sin, and the distractions that keep us from recognizing the Presence of God in our lives. Our sins put 'us' in the centre, while the Sacrament of Reconciliation (one-on-one confession to a priest) allows us to put 'God' in the centre. It's a common practice that each mid-sized or large parish hosts a Reconciliation service during Advent, or several small parishes join together for the same purpose. During this unusual COVID-19 pandemic, most (if not all) parishes have cancelled large gatherings like this, altogether. I would strongly encourage all pastors to use their creativity to make confession time available at their parish (before or after mass) or by appointment, in a venue that entails social distancing and other necessary safety protocols.

ADVENT LITURGICAL READINGS

The Mass readings for Advent are carefully planned. The Sunday themes move from the Second Coming of Christ on the 1st Sunday of Advent, to John the Baptist preparing for the coming of Jesus on the 2nd and 3rd Sundays. On the 4th Sunday, the Gospel of Matthew or Luke announces the conception of Jesus and Mary's visit to her cousin, Elizabeth, who is John the Baptist's mother. As a whole, the readings put us in touch with the centuries of longing on the part of the Old Testament saints like David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and all those whose names we'll never know. This is the unbroken tradition of those who prayed and waited for the faithful God to bless His people with a Messiah.

THE JESSE TREE

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke contain lists of the ancestors of Jesus. Matthew 1:1-17 goes back to Abraham, and Luke 3:23-28 goes back to Adam. Not every ancestor is mentioned, because the main purpose is to connect Jesus to Abraham and to Adam. Primarily, this history puts us in touch with the continuous longing of the Chosen People for a Messiah. During the days of Advent, the names of important persons in the Old Testament and quotes from the New Testament are hung on the branches of the Jesse tree as a preparation for Christmas.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The Christmas Tree developed out of the medieval religious Paradise play, in which a fir tree decorated with apples was used to symbolize the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gn. 2:9). The play told the story of creation, of the sin of Adam and Eve, and of their expulsion from paradise. The play ended with the promise of the coming of the Savior and the story of Bethlehem. If the pageant took place inside, lighted candles were placed around the tree. Eventually the Paradise tree found its way into the homes of the faithful, becoming a symbol of the coming of the Messiah. By the 15th century, the fir tree was decorated with apples. Gradually, small wafers were added to the apples as decorations for the tree—the wafers symbolizing the Eucharist. The meaning was deeply rooted in faith and Scripture: the tree which bore the apples, symbolizing the sin of Adam and Eve, also bore the saving fruit of the Eucharist. Later, the wafers were replaced by pieces of white pastry in the form of stars, angels, hearts, flowers, and bells, as well as cookies. By the middle of the 17th century, candles, representing Christ as the light of the world, were placed on the tree. As glass decorations were added to the cookies and the fruit on the tree, our modern Christmas tree came to be.

THE CRECHE

The Creche came to us through St. Francis of Assisi, who lived during the 13th century. St. Francis was devoted to the humanity of Christ who came to us as a baby and died for us amidst suffering. So devoted was he, that at the beginning of his ministry, he prayed before a cross in the small country church of San Damiano, that was in a state of disrepair. He restored the church with his fellow friars, and went about preaching reconciliation of enemies. St. Francis taught the people to understand how much God loves them by showing them a nativity scene containing the Christ child in the manger, with Mary and Joseph nearby, along with the donkey, ox, the shepherds, and the three wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem.

CHRISTMAS MASS

In the early monasteries, people from the countryside gathered in the warmth of the monastery churches to be forgiven, to sing of the newborn Savior, and to participate in the Eucharist. The readings not only proclaim the birth of Christ, but also remind us that the grace of God appeared, offering salvation to all people!

Have a joyful Advent 2020!

Fr. Pierre Champoux

Director of vocations, Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall

Nov. 28, 2020