

History of Advent - origins & trivia

It cannot be determined with any degree of certainty when the celebration of Advent was first introduced into the Church. The preparation for the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord was not held before the feast itself existed. One of the earliest references to Christmas being celebrated on December 25 appeared in Antioch in the middle of the second century. At that time, Christians were still persecuted. An official determination was made in the fourth century, when the Roman emperor Constantine embraced Christianity, thereby ensuring the legality of Christmas celebrations.

The Council of Tours in 567 established the period of Advent as a time of fasting before Christmas. They also proclaimed the twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany a sacred, festive season.

According to present usage [1910], 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 November 27th, and then Advent has twenty-eight days, or as late as December 3rd, giving the season only twenty-one days.

The familiar carol "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" belongs to the Advent season since it celebrates the expectation of Christ's coming rather than His actual birth.

(One popular idea that the four weeks of Advent symbolize the four thousand years of darkness in which the world was enveloped before the coming of Christ finds no authoritative confirmation)

First Week of Advent: Sets the tone for the season

COLLECT

Grant Your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet Your Christ
with righteous deeds at His coming,
so that, gathered at His right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God,
for ever and ever.

GOSPEL EXCERPT (with reference to Greek words used in original)

“Be vigilant (ἀγρυπνεῖτε, agrupneite) at all times
and pray (δεόμενοι, deomenoi) that you have the strength
to escape the tribulations that are imminent
and to stand before the Son of Man (Luke 21:36).”

REFLECTION ON ADVENT

Gospel actions in Advent focus on being vigilant and praying.

- ἀγρυπνέω (agrupneo) translated here as “**be vigilant**” literally means “**to be without sleep.**” In antiquity, the soldier standing guard was the one who went “without sleep.” It was clearly understood that the soldier on duty not only went “without sleep” but was also alert, attentive, and “**looked after the needs of those under his watch.**” ἀγρυπνέω implied that some peril, generically understood as an external threat, existed and the first line of defense for the citizenry ‘rested’ in the attentive soldier whose work was for the good of others.

- *δέομαι (deomai) is one of a few Greek verbs that can be translated “to pray.” In its early Greek usage, δέομαι expressed ‘lacking something essential for life.’ δέομαι in this context often conveyed an immediate threat to life and the “asking” (its eventual meaning in later Greek) was a focused honing of all one’s energy and attention to secure the necessary item or help. In many situations when the essentials were provided to someone or to a group, the recipient was drawn into a new relationship with the provider. It was not necessarily ‘paying back’ as many recipients would never be in a position to do so; rather it was more an expression of gratitude for what the other had done in providing for life’s necessities. When the meaning evolves in later Greek “to ask,” it becomes one of the verbs used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) and the New Testament “to pray.” Of all the verbs translated “to pray,” **the original meaning of δέομαι helps to direct prayer in a proper direction: the essentials of life viewed in the context of salvation.***
- *Together ἀγρυπνέω and δέομαι frame early Advent’s work. In a few short weeks, the celebration of Our Lord’s Nativity will be upon us. Many of the events surrounding His birth as recorded in the Lucan Gospel abound in joy, joy and more joy. Hence a question worth wrestling with in Advent in the light of ἀγρυπνέω is, ‘what external threats are there to authentic joy?’ (For now, the emphasis is on ‘external threats.’ Internal threats will come into view shortly.)*
- *Secondly, in the context of δέομαι, ‘do I know what essentials are lacking in my/our life/lives?’ Obviously, ‘answers’ to these questions are not easy to come by and nor should they. The questions call us to an Advent stillness to sharpen the senses as to the assaults on salvation joy and to then rejoice gratefully in the deeper relationship made possible by the One Who Provides, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

During the Liturgical Season of Advent, we walk through the great events of Christian history so as to inculcate them into our daily lives and offer their promise to the whole world. During Advent we are invited through our liturgical readings and practices, to clear away all that entangles us and open a space in our hearts, our homes, our relationships and our lives, for Love Incarnate to be born again.

ADVENT: WAITING FOR THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH AND RETURN

*("Our whole life should be an 'advent', in vigilant expectation of Christ's final coming."
Pope John Paul II).*

- I. Historical and thematic basis for advent and the Christmas Season
 - A. Advent comes from the Latin words ***ad-venio or adventus*** meaning "arrival" or a "coming".
 - B. No record of Advent ***or Christmas*** being celebrated until the end of the fourth century.
 - C. Two Gospels do not have the infancy narrative
 - D. The liturgy of Advent is filled with constant allusions to the expectation of the Messiah. It is not just about commemorating the historical event, which occurred some 2,000 years ago. Advent is to be a *period of "purification and enlightenment"* that directs us decisively to the One who has already come, who will come and who continuously comes.
 - E. Three guides and examples in Advent liturgy
 1. Isaiah, [the prophet of consolation and hope] proclaims a true Gospel for the people of Israel, enslaved in Babylon, and *urges them to remain vigilant in prayer*, to recognize "the signs" of the coming of the Messiah.
 2. John the Baptist, the precursor of the Messiah, who is presented as a "voice crying in the wilderness", preaching "*a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*" (cf. Mk 1,4).
 3. Mary, who in this period of preparation for Christmas, guides us towards Bethlehem. Mary is the *Woman of the "yes"* who, contrary to Eve, makes the plan of God her own without reservation. Thus she becomes *the highest model* for inspiration.
- II. Advent: the beginning of a new liturgical year
 1. Macrocosm of entire theology

- a. Trinity: Luke interprets the conception of Christ precisely in the light of the Trinity: this is attested by the angel's words to Mary. The transcendent divine presence is revealed in Gabriel's announcement: God the Father — through the work of the Holy Spirit, and in the line of David's descendants — gives his Son to the world: "You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David" (Lk 1: 31-32).
- b. During the Advent season we review our salvation history and God's promise of a Savior and the plan of salvation; the second coming.

A. Advent themes:

- 1. Preparation for Christmas, the incarnation of God; preparation for second coming.
 - a. The Advent liturgy opens with the prophets of Israel for the Messiah and Redeemer whose advent they awaited to "come!"
 - b. God hears His people and fulfills the promise of salvation made after the fall of Adam and Eve by sending His Son into the world.
 - c. Have no fear: In the season of Advent, we are reminded of the invitation of the Prophet Isaiah: *"Say to those who are fearful of heart. Be strong, fear not! Behold, your God ... will come and save you"* (Is 35,4). Do not be afraid: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy.... For to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2: 10-11); "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:14) [This was the theme of the very first message of Pope John Paul II after being elected Pope.]
 - d. The redemption is near; have hope. *"Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near"* (Lk 21:28). Luke highlights the fear that terrifies human beings before the final upheaval. In contrast, however, the Evangelist presents with far greater emphasis *the joyful prospect of Christian expectation: "Then"*, he says, "they will see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great

glory" (Lk 21:27). This is the message of hope to the believer.

- e. Be vigilant. *"Watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man"* (Lk 21:36). This liturgy tells of Jesus' *"second coming"*; that is, it speaks of Christ's glorious return, which will coincide with what, in simple terms, is called *"the end of the world"*. It is a mysterious event which in apocalyptic language appears for the most part as an immense cataclysm. Like the end of the individual, that is death, the end of the universe causes anguish at the unknown, fear of suffering, along with questions filled with anxiety about the *"afterlife"*.
- f. The intervention of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit shares in the Incarnation, and indeed it is this action which makes the conception of Jesus unique and unrepeatable: *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God"* (Lk 1: 35). The angel's words are like a short Creed which sheds light on the identity of Christ in relation to the other Persons of the Trinity.
- g. Incarnation; "Emmanuel." At the center of the Catholic faith is the Incarnation, in which the glory of the Trinity and the Trinity's love for us is revealed: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... we have beheld his glory"* (Jn 1: 14). *"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son"* (Jn 3: 16). *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him"* (1 Jn 4: 9). Apostle Paul in his Letter to the Galatians is emblematic: *"When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'. So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir"* (Gal 4: 4-7; cf. Rom 8: 15-17). Near the end of His time on earth, Jesus called us His friends, we are no longer servants.

2. Advent and Christmas season is filled with Christian symbolism

- a. City of Bethlehem - etymologically its name means *"house of bread"* - and the paschal mystery of the Eucharist is, in a

certain way, already foretold.

- b. Manger Scenes: St. Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first Christmas crib. He told his friend John da Vellita, "I would make a memorial of that Christ who was born in Bethlehem and in some sort behold with bodily eyes the hardships of His infant state, lying on hay in a manger with the ox and the ass standing by." In 1223, he set up a crib at his hermitage in Greccio, Italy, and from that day the practice spread throughout the whole world. The crib is now an important liturgical symbol.
- c. Advent colors: Christmas and Easter each have their penitential seasons of anticipation, Advent and Lent. The liturgical color used during both Advent and Lent is purple, a sign of penance. The Church also emphasizes the penitential dimension of the season by directing the use of sparse ornaments in church and by legislating that instrumental music should not be used, except to sustain congregational singing.
- d. The Advent Wreath: The Advent wreath is part of long-standing Catholic tradition. The actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during cold and dark December days as a sign of hope of future warmth and extended-sunlight days of spring. In Scandinavia, during the winter, lit candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn "the wheel of the earth" back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth. By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. [Christ is "the Light that came into the world" to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (Jn 3:19-21).] By 1500, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.
 - (1) The symbolism of the Advent wreath: The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. The evergreens have a traditional meaning: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism: The prickly leaves remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. The circle of the wreath,

which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul and the everlasting life found in Christ. Any pine cones, nuts or seedpods used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection.

- e. Advent candles: The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents 1,000 years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the birth of the Jesus. Three candles are purple and one is rose. The purple candles in particular symbolize the prayer, penance and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, when the priest also wears rose vestments at Mass; Gaudete Sunday is the Sunday of rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over and they are close to Christmas. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead.
 - (1) The candle light signifies Christ, the Light of the world. The unlighted candles represent the dark ages before Christ's coming. Some modern day adaptations include a white candle placed in the middle of the wreath, which represents Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve. Another tradition is to replace the three purple and one rose candles with four white candles, which will be lit throughout Christmas season
- f. December 25: In the early centuries of the Church, the date of Christmas was set in the last days of the year (late December, as reckoned by the Julian calendar) in an attempt to "Christianize" the pagan feast, *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*. Translated "the birth of the Invincible Sun" that celebrated the lengthening of daylight in the wake of the winter solstice.
- g. Christmas angels: Gabriel: "the angel of the Lord" is identified as Gabriel, the angel who Daniel 9:20-25 announces the seventy weeks of years and the coming of an anointed one, a prince. By alluding to Old Testament themes in Luke 1:17,19 (the coming of the day of the Lord and the dawning of the messianic era) Luke is focusing on the significance of the births of John and Jesus.

The liturgical season of the Church Year: Advent.

The focus in the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours, the official prayer of the Church, during Advent season is on preparing for the coming(s) of the Lord. One of the readings is taken from an Advent homily given by St. Bernard of Clairveaux. He reminds us of all the Lord's comings. He then situates us where we live our daily lives, on the road of continual conversion, the heart of the Christian vocation:

"We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible while the other two are visible. In the first coming He was seen on earth, dwelling among men; : in the final coming "all flesh will see the salvation of our God and they will look upon Him whom they have pierced". The intermediate coming is a hidden one; in it only the elect see the Lord within their own selves, and they are saved. In His first coming our Lord came in our flesh and our weakness; in this middle coming He comes in Spirit and in power; in the final coming he will be seen in glory and in majesty. Because this coming lies between the other two, it is like a road on which we travel from the first coming to the last." (St. Bernard of Clairveaux)