



## KNOW & GROW TOPIC OF THE WEEK: WHAT'S THE STORY BEHIND THE ADVENT WREATH?

The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended sunlit days of Spring. In Scandinavia during Winter, lighted 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 adopted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. After all, Christ is “the Light that came into the world” to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (cf. John 3:19-21). By 1500, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The various evergreens signify continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has 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. All together, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true God, becoming also true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection.



The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Savior. (This tradition is exemplified in the work of Anglican Archbishop James Ussher who in his 1650 treatise *The Annals of the Old Testament, Deduced from the First Origin of the World*, gave the date of Creation at 4004 B.C.; interestingly, he even pinpointed October 23 at 12 noon.) 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; this 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.

Again, the light signifies Christ, the Light of the world. Some modern day adaptations include a white candle placed in the middle of the wreath, which represents Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve.