

## **Advent in the Catholic Church**

The season of Advent is the time each year that the Church sets aside to prepare for the birth of the Messiah celebrated at Christmas. It is a time when we should think of ourselves in a spiritual sense as waiting eagerly alongside the expecting Mary who also is awaiting her Son's birth.

Advent is considered a penitential season by the Church. That is why the color of the vestments and the candles is purple. It is penitential, but not in the exact same way as Lent is penitential, but it does have a penitential character about it. It is a time for us to be able to prepare our hearts for the new Christ-Child to be born anew in them; a time to clear out those things that have perhaps entered that do not have a place in the home of the Prince of Peace and the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Church has many "Advent Practices" that go along with this time of expectation:

- The Advent Wreath – the 3 purple candles and 1 white/pink candle that accompany each of the 4 Sundays of Advent. These are seen in church but can be easily found for homes as well.
- The Advent candle – some homes of German ancestry keep a single large white candle on a candlestick wrapped in white silk, kept burning throughout Advent in honor of the Blessed Virgin, who waits expectantly for the birth of Her Son.
- The Creche or Nativity Scene – traditionally ascribed first to Saint Francis of Assisi. It does not appear in churches until Christmas Eve, but is a little model of the manger where Our Lord was born. The empty manger, set up at the beginning of Advent can be a reminder of the arrival of the Holy Family at Christmas, the Shepherds soon after, and the Magi on Epiphany.
  - The French have a custom of setting up the empty manger at the beginning of Advent and adding wisps of hay to the manger for each little act of penance or service that each member of the family does during the season, so that by the end of the 4 weeks, the family has provided a warm and welcoming place for the Christ Child.
- The Advent Calendar – readily available in religious goods stores, these calendars have a door to open for each of the 23 days of December leading up to December 24<sup>th</sup>.
- Christ Child letters – it is an old German custom for children on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent to write a letter to the Christ Child, telling Him how they plan to spend their Advent in preparation for His birth. They then put the letter in a place where their Guardian Angel will be able to find it and deliver it.
- Celebrating Saint Nicholas' Day (Dec 6<sup>th</sup>) – This is the feast day of the real Bishop Nicholas of Bari who was known for his love to the poor. Many families will have their children leave their shoes out the night before to find them filled with small gifts and sweets.

The Church has many wonderful traditions that have developed for the celebration of Christmas and week of celebration that continues the Christmas season from many

different cultures in addition to the usual tree and home decorating, gift giving, and baking of cookies:

- In Norway (where I spent a Christmas while in the seminary) it was practically required that every home have a Christmas tree with strands of small Norwegian flags running from the bottom of the tree to the top, in honor of their independence.
- In Polish, Slovak, and Lithuanian areas, a large flat decorated wafer, similar to a very large host is given to each person in the family to break off a piece, and then dipped in honey to remind all present of Christ who comes to us as the “Bread of Heaven” and that all quarrels are to be put to an end.
- In Latin American countries, especially Mexico, a 9-day celebration beginning on December 19<sup>th</sup> and ending on December 24<sup>th</sup> called LAS POSADAS is celebrated. Nine families in a neighborhood are chosen to have their homes as “inns” for the Holy Family to approach. Candlelight processions move each night to a different home to have the scene enacted that there is no room for the Holy Family until the last night, when at last the Holy Family is welcomed.
- Candles placed in windows – when it was forbidden to practice the Catholic Faith in Ireland under British rule. The Irish developed a Christmas Eve tradition that served as a secret message. Since priests were outlawed and had to travel under the cover of darkness in secret, the sight of burning candles in windows and a door left open was a sign to a passing priest that he was welcome to enter and celebrate a Mass in their home, something that Irish Catholic families would pray for all year. This custom was brought to the United States by immigrants.
- The poinsettia plant, with its big red leaves remind us of the passionate love of Jesus, in the shape of the star that hung over Bethlehem that night some 2000 years ago.

And many traditions that are attached to the days immediately following Christmas:

- Feast of St John the Apostle (Dec 27<sup>th</sup>)– on this day it is a tradition to have a priest bless a bottle of wine in honor of the story of Saint John the Apostle who once drank a cup of poisoned wine but was not harmed because he had first blessed the wine.
- Feast of the Holy Innocents (Dec 28<sup>th</sup>) – on this day which remembers the slaughter of the Holy Innocents by King Herod, it is good to pray for an end to abortion and a renewed respect for life.
- New Year’s Day, the Feast of Our Lady (Jan 1<sup>st</sup>) – on this day in some rural places of the United States settled by German and Russian immigrants, the children would go to visit their relatives and friends on New Year’s Day, and beginning with their godparents.

Why not make a new tradition in your family from some of these old traditions this during Advent, Christmas and after?

*(Some information adapted from Building Catholic Family Traditions by Paul and Lisa Thigpen, Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1999.)*