

The Advent Wreath

The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. Catholics use 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).

(Note: We use candles in the Advent wreath and put lights on a tree and sometimes outside, on and around our homes, signifying the coming of Christ Who is the Light of the world. The light shines in the darkness, which is most evident during this time of the year which is darker due to shorter daylight hours.)

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying 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 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. 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 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. 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.

The light again 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. Another tradition is to replace the three purple and one rose candles with four white candles, which will be lit throughout Christmas season.

In family practice, the Advent wreath is most appropriately lit at dinner time after the blessing of the food. A traditional prayer service using the Advent wreath proceeds as follows: On the First Sunday of Advent, the father of the family blesses the wreath, praying: O God, by whose word all things are sanctified, pour forth Thy blessing upon this wreath, and grant that we who use it may prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ and may receive from Thee abundant graces. Who lives and reigns forever. Amen." He then continues for each of the days of the first week of Advent, O Lord, stir up Thy might, we beg thee, and come, that by Thy protection we may deserve to be rescued from the threatening dangers of our sins and saved by Thy deliverance. Who lives and reigns forever. Amen." The youngest child then lights one purple candle.

During the second week of Advent, the father prays: O Lord, stir up our hearts that we may prepare for Thy only begotten Son, that through His coming we may be made worthy to serve Thee with pure minds. Who lives and reigns forever. Amen." The oldest child then lights the purple candle from the first week plus one more purple candle.

During the third week of Advent, the father prays: O Lord, we beg Thee, incline Thy ear to our prayers and enlighten the darkness of our minds by the grace of Thy visitation. Who lived and reigns forever. Amen." The mother then lights the two previously lit purple candles plus the rose candle.

Finally, the father prays during the fourth week of Advent, O Lord, stir up Thy power, we pray Thee, and come; and with great might help us, that with the help of Thy grace, Thy merciful forgiveness may hasten what our sins impede. Who lives and reigns forever. Amen." The father then lights all of the candles of the wreath.

Since Advent is a time to stir-up our faith in the Lord, the wreath and its prayers provide us a way to augment this special preparation for Christmas. Moreover, this good tradition helps us to remain vigilant in our homes and not lose sight of the true meaning of Christmas.

Used with permission from Rev. William Saunders, Pastor of Our Lady of Hope Parish in Sterling, VA. This condensed version was taken from "The History of the Advent Wreath."