

## The Season of Advent in the Catholic Church

### A Time of Preparation



### **Advent: A Time of Preparation**

In the Christian Catholic Church, Advent is a period of preparation, extending over four Sundays, before Christmas. The word *Advent* comes from the Latin *advenio*, "to come to," and refers to the coming of Christ. Advent is multi-faceted: **first** of all, it refers to our celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas; **second**, to the coming of Christ in our lives through grace and the Sacrament of Holy Communion; and **finally**, to His Second Coming at the end of time.

Our preparations, therefore, should have all three comings in mind. In each instance, we are called to a need to prepare our souls to receive Christ worthily.

### **First We Fast, Then We Feast**

That's why Advent has traditionally been known as a "little Lent." As in Lent, Advent should be marked by increased prayer, fasting, and good works. While the Western Church no longer has a set requirement for fasting during Advent, the Eastern Church, continues to observe an Advent fast from November 15 until Christmas Day.

Traditionally, all great feasts have been preceded by a time of fasting, which makes the feast itself more joyful. Sadly, Advent today has been supplanted by "the Christmas shopping season," so that by Christmas Day, many people no longer fully enjoy the feast.

### **The Symbols of Advent**

In its symbolism, the Church continues to stress the penitential and preparatory nature of Advent. As during Lent, priests wear purple colored vestments, and the Gloria ("Glory to God") is omitted during the Liturgy of the Mass. The only exception is on the Third Sunday of Advent, known as **Gaudete Sunday**, when priests may wear optional, rose-colored vestments. As on **Laetare Sunday** during Lent, this exception is designed to encourage us to continue our prayer and fasting, because we can see that Advent is now more than halfway completed.



## The Advent Wreath

Perhaps the best-known of all Advent symbols is the Advent wreath, a custom which originated among German Lutherans, but was later adopted by Catholics. Consisting of four candles (three purple and one pink) arranged in a circle with evergreen boughs (and often a fifth, white candle in the center), the Advent wreath corresponds to the four Sundays of Advent. The purple candles represent the penitential nature of the season, while the pink candle calls to mind the respite of *Gaudete Sunday*. (The white candle, when used, represents the arrival of the Christ child.)

## Celebrating Advent

We can better enjoy Christmas—all 12 days of it, from Christmas Day to the Epiphany—if we revive Advent as a period of preparation. Abstaining from meat on Fridays, or not eating at all between meals, is one, good way to revive the Advent fast. (Not eating Christmas cookies or listening to Christmas music before Christmas is another.) We can incorporate such customs as the Advent wreath, the Saint Andrew Christmas Novena, the Jesse Tree into our daily ritual, and we can set some time aside for special scripture readings during Advent, which remind us of the three-fold coming of Christ.

Holding off on putting up the Christmas tree and other decorations is another way to remind ourselves that the feast is not here yet. Traditionally, such decorations were put up on Christmas Eve, and they would not be taken down until after Epiphany, in order to celebrate the Christmas season to its fullest.

- **Celebrate All Twelve Days of Christmas**

Now that Christmas Day has passed, the presents have been opened, and the feast has been prepared (and eaten!), it's time to take down the Christmas tree, pack up the decorations, and start dreaming about next Christmas, right? In an important way, Epiphany completes the Christmas feast, because it is the day that we celebrate the fact that Christ came to bring salvation to the Gentiles, as well as to the Jews. That's why the Old Testament reading for the Epiphany is Isaiah 60:1-6, which is a prophecy of Christ's birth and the submission of all nations to Him, and includes a specific prophecy of the Wise Men coming to pay homage to Christ.

- The Solemnity of Epiphany
- Abstinence in the Catholic Church

- Family Activities and Devotions for Celebrating Advent
- **The Saint Andrew Christmas Novena**

While a novena is normally a nine-day prayer, the term is sometimes used for any prayer that is repeated over a series of days. That is the case with one of the most beloved of all Advent devotions, the Saint Andrew Christmas Novena.

The *Saint Andrew Christmas Novena* is often called simply the "Christmas Novena" or the "Christmas Anticipation Prayer," because it is prayed 15 times every day from the Feast of Saint Andrew, the Apostle (November 30) until Christmas. It is an ideal Advent devotion; the First Sunday of Advent is the Sunday closest to the Feast of Saint Andrew.

While the novena is tied to the Feast of Saint Andrew, it is not actually addressed to Saint Andrew but to God Himself; asking Him to grant our request in honor of the birth of His Son at Christmas. You can say the prayer all 15 times, all at once; or divide up the recitation as necessary (perhaps five times at each meal throughout the day).

### **An Ideal and Historical Family Devotion for Advent**

Prayed as a family, the *Saint Andrew Christmas Novena* is a very good way to help focus the attention of children on the Advent season.

### **The Saint Andrew Christmas Novena**

*Hail and blessed be the hour and moment  
in which the Son of God was born of the most pure Virgin Mary,  
at midnight, in Bethlehem, in piercing cold.  
In that hour, vouchsafe, O my God!  
to hear my prayer and grant my desires,  
through the merits of Our Savior Jesus Christ,  
and of His Blessed Mother. Amen.*

### **An Explanation of the Saint Andrew Christmas Novena**

The opening words of this prayer—"*Hail and blessed be the hour and moment*"—may seem odd at first. But they reflect the Christian belief that moments in the life of Christ—His conception in the womb of the Blessed Virgin at the Annunciation; His birth in Bethlehem; His death on Calvary; His Resurrection; His Ascension—are not only special but, in an important sense, still present to the faithful today. The repetition of the first sentence of this prayer is designed to place us, mentally and spiritually, there in the stable at His birth, just as an icon of the Nativity or a Nativity scene is meant to do. Having entered into His presence, in the second sentence we place our petition at the feet of the Newborn Child.

*Definitions of Words Used in the Saint Andrew Christmas Novena*

- Hail:** an exclamation, a greeting  
**Blessed:** holy  
**Most pure:** spotless, unstained; a reference to Mary's Immaculate Conception and her lifelong sinlessness  
**Vouchsafe:** to grant something, especially to someone who doesn't deserve it on their own merit(s)  
**Desires:** something one wants strongly; in this case, not a physical or gluttonous desire, but a spiritual one  
**Merits:** good deeds or virtuous actions that are pleasing in God's sight.

- Jesse (or Giving) Tree (for the less fortunate this Christmas season)
- Daily Scripture Readings for Advent



- **When Should You Put Up Your Christmas Tree?**

### **The Traditional Answer**

Traditionally, Christians did not put up their Christmas trees until after noon on Christmas Eve. The same was true of all Christmas decorations. The purpose of the tree and the decorations is to celebrate the feast of Christmas, which begins with the celebration of Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve (when/where offered). By putting our Christmas trees up too early, we tend to celebrate the feast of Christmas prematurely, and Christmas Day itself may lose some of its sense of fulfillment and joyfulness when it finally arrives.

- **When Should You Take Down Your Christmas Tree?**

### **The Traditional Answer**

Traditionally, Catholics did not take down their Christmas trees and other Christmas decorations until January 7, the day after the Epiphany. The *Twelve Days of Christmas* begin on Christmas Day; the period before that is Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas. The twelve days of Christmas end on Epiphany, the day when the Three Wise Men came to pay homage to the Child Jesus.

(SR: <http://catholicism.about.com/od/holydaysandholidays/p/Advent.htm>)