

The History and Meaning of Advent

What is Advent?

Presented on November 26, 2017

The word 'Advent' is from the Latin 'Adventus,' which means 'coming.' Advent is the beginning of a new liturgical year (in the Western churches), and encompasses the span of time from the fourth Sunday before Christmas, until the Nativity of Our Lord is celebrated. The first Sunday of Advent is the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew the Apostle (which is November 30th), and so it will always fall somewhere between November 27th at the earliest and December 3rd at the latest. The liturgical color for this season is purple (Usually a deep purple as opposed to the lighter, red-violet shade of purple associated with Lent).

Like Lent, Advent is a preparatory season. It has significance because it is a season of looking forward and waiting for something greater; both for the annual celebration of the event of Christ's birth, and for the time when Christ will come again.

As noted in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, during Advent, the faithful are asked:

- to prepare themselves worthily to celebrate the anniversary of the Lord's coming into the world as the incarnate God of love,
- thus to make their souls fitting abodes for the Redeemer coming in Holy Communion and through grace, and
- thereby to make themselves ready for His final coming as judge, at death and at the end of the world.

Origin and History of Advent

The exact time when the season of Advent came to be celebrated is not precisely known. Of course, it was not in practice before the celebration of the Nativity and Christmastide began; the earliest evidence shows that the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord was established within the later part of the 4th century. There are homilies from the 5th century that discuss preparation in a general sense, but do not indicate an official liturgical season. A Synod held in 590 established that Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from November 11th until the Nativity would be offered according to the Lenten rite. This and other traditions, such as fasting, show that the period of time now established as the Advent season was more penitential (similar to Lent) than the liturgical season as we know it today.

A collection of homilies from Pope St. Gregory the Great (whose papacy was from 590-604) included a sermon for the second Sunday of Advent, and by 650 Spain was celebrating the Sundays (five at the time) of Advent. So it seems the liturgical season was established around the latter part of the 6th century and first half of the 7th century. For the next couple of centuries, Advent was celebrated for five Sundays; Pope Gregory VII, who was pope from 1073-85, reduced the number to four Sundays.

Advent Today

The themes and traditions of the Advent season have evolved throughout the history of the liturgical season. As mentioned, the early Advent season was mainly penitential, close to the theme of the Lenten season. Today a penitential theme still exists, but it is not as intense as in 7th century. Also, it is blended with the theme of prayerful, spiritual preparation for the second and final coming of the Lord, as well as the joyful preparation for the annual festive remembrance of the Incarnation and Christ's birth.

In recent decades, a trend of wearing blue vestments rather than purple during Advent has emerged. However, purple is the appropriate vestment color, as noted in paragraph 346 of the [General Instruction of the Roman Missal](#), in the section which discusses the prescribed colors for liturgical vestments:

- Violet or purple is used in Advent and Lent. It may also be worn in Offices and Masses for the Dead.
- Rose may be used, where it is the practice, on Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent) and on Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent).

To sum up the similarities and differences between Advent and Lent as penitential seasons, there's this, by Fr. Lawrence Smith:

Advent is the time to make ready for Christ to live with us. Lent is the time to make us ready to die with Christ. Advent makes Lent possible. Lent makes salvation possible. Advent is the time when eternity approaches earth. Lent is the time when time reaches consummation in Christ's eternal Sacrifice to the Father. Advent leads to

Christ's life in time on earth. Lent leads to Christ's eternal Life in Heaven. The Cross—through the Mass, penance, and mortification—is the bridge connecting Advent and Lent, Christ and His Church, man and God.

Each of the Church's penitential seasons is a dying to the world with the goal of attaining new life in Christ.

Catholic apologist Jacob Michael wrote something very interesting about how secular America sees "Christmas" as beginning after Thanksgiving and ending on 25 December, and then makes "New Years Resolutions" at the beginning of the secular year:

...what Christians do (or should be doing!) during Advent and leading up to Christmas is a foreshadowing of what they will do during the days of their lives that lead up to the Second Coming; what non-Christians refuse to do during Advent, and put off until after Christmas, is precisely a foreshadowing of what they will experience at the Second Coming.

We Christians are to prepare for the Coming of Christ before He actually comes—and that Coming is symbolized and recalled at Christmas. Non-Christians miss this season of preparation, and then scramble for six days after the 25th to make their resolutions. By then, however, it's too late—Christmas has come and gone. Our Lord has already made His visitation to the earth, and He has found them unprepared. This is precisely what will take place at the Second Coming, when those who have put off for their entire lives the necessary preparations will suddenly be scrambling to put their affairs in order. Unfortunately, by then it will have been too late, and there will be no time for repentance. The Second Coming will be less forgiving than the Incarnation. There will be no four-week warning period before the Second Coming, like we get during Advent. There will be no six-day period of grace after the Second Coming during which to make resolutions and self-examination, like the secular world does from Dec. 26 until Jan. 1.

So please, restore Advent and don't think "Christmas is here" until it truly comes. One way to help focus on the theme of preparation is to read the parables of The Fig Tree, The Man Going on a Long Journey, The Faithful and Wicked Stewards, and The Ten Virgins in the 24th and 25th chapters of St. Matthew's Gospel. Another way to help you do this is to think of the Saint who embodies the spirit of this Season more than any other: the great St. John the Baptist. If you have an icon of him, venerate it especially now. Make special prayers to him and consider the message of this "voice of one crying in the desert": "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." You will note that the readings of the second, third, and fourth Sundays of Advent focus on St. John, the earthly herald of Christ's coming whom St. Ephraem likened to the Star of Bethlehem, the Heavenly herald of His coming.

OCTAVE ETC...

We all know that [Christmas](#) officially begins on Christmas Eve, but when does Christmas end?

On the Feast of the Epiphany (celebrated either on January 6 or on the Sunday between January 2 and January 8), the Church celebrates the event where the Magi, also called the Three Wise Men or Three Kings, traveled from the East to pay homage to the newborn King, Jesus Christ. Many Catholics believe that this is the date when the Christmas season officially ends, being the end of the 12 days of Christmas.

However, according to the Roman Catholic Calendar for 2014, Ordinary Time doesn't officially begin until the Monday after the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, which falls on the Sunday *after* Epiphany. This means that the Christmas season actually extends beyond the "Twelve Days of Christmas."

In older traditions (which are still kept in the liturgical calendar of the Extraordinary Form of the Mass) Christmas lasted until Candle-mas, or the Feast of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of the Lord, which isn't until February 2nd. This marked the end of a long 40 day "Christmastide" that corresponded to the 40 days of Lent. On February 2nd the Church celebrates the day that Mary entered the temple with the Child Jesus when her days of purification after giving birth were fulfilled (according to the Mosaic law) and when Simeon made his well-known prophecy about Mary and the Child. It is called "Candle-mas" because of Simeon's prophecy of Jesus being a light for the Gentiles.

Another element to throw into the mix is that the "octave" of Christmas ends on the eighth day after Christmas, which is January 1 and the Feast Day of Mary, the Mother of God. Major feast days are usually celebrated not just during 24 hours, but given the honor of an octave (8 days) which is a custom that traces its roots to Old Testament feasts. The end of the octave can be seen as the end of the Christmas feast proper, after which begins the longer Christmas season that extends either to the Baptism of the Lord for the Ordinary Form (this year January 12, or the Sunday after Epiphany) or the Presentation of the Lord for the Extraordinary Form (February 2). However this understanding of a proper Christmas 'feast' in some traditions is also associated with the 12 Days of Christmas which culminates on Epiphany.