

# ADVENT SYMBOLISM

## RESOURCES

FOR THE DIOCESE OF OSSORY



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# ADVENT

The liturgical season of Advent is upon us once more. Of all the seasons in the Church's year, Advent is in many ways the most beautiful and rich in meaning. And yet it passes most of us by.

A lot of us ask the question 'Can it really be that time of year already?' Many associate this sacred time with the 'Christmas rush', with presents to buy and cards to send. It can be a time that can be both exciting and exhausting. With all the physical preparations for Christmas we can very easily lose sight that it is in fact ourselves that need to be prepared to accept the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ. This is the perfect time for us to reflect on the marvelous gift of the Son of God entering our world as one of us and the difference his coming made. It is also a time when we can reflect on our relationship with God.

The liturgical season of Advent is a sacred and special time of preparation and waiting for the coming of Jesus.

The word Advent derives from the Latin word meaning 'coming'. During Advent we recall the history of God's people and reflect on how the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled. This gives us a background for the present. Today we can reflect on the past track record of God and so begin to understand what it means to us now for the sake of what is to come, in our own future and that of our world.

Advent is the time to understand and appreciate what Christmas really means.



# ADVENT SACRAMENTS

In these Advent days we focus on the coming of Jesus Christ. At Christmas we remember his first coming in the stable at Bethlehem. Nativity plays and the cribs in our churches depict this event and they remind us of the great gift that God has given us by sending us his Son. But, Advent focuses on two other comings of Jesus that are equally important. First of all, it tells us that Jesus will return at the end of time and will share his life and glory with all who are saved.

The readings at Mass during the first part of Advent concentrate on this coming of Jesus at the end of history. Secondly, Advent calls us to be aware of the presence of Jesus among us now. In our prayer, in our relationships with others, in our work and play, the Lord Jesus is present.

Advent then is about three comings of the Lord: remembering his first coming over 2,000 years ago; recognising his presence among us today; and, looking forward in hope to his coming again at a time that only God knows. In other words, Advent brings together our past, our present and our future.

Sacraments do the very same. When we celebrate the sacraments we believe that Jesus comes to us in a special way. In the celebration we now meet Jesus who once proclaimed the Kingdom of God and we come face to face with the Risen Lord who is to come in glory.

When we celebrate Mass, for example, we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus that he freely gives to us. We remember Jesus at the Last Supper with his disciples and we now become part of that great gesture of love.

But, did you ever think that when we celebrate Mass and receive Holy Communion that the food we receive comes from the future? Jesus who sends us the bread of life is now at the right hand of God. Together with Mary and the Saints he enjoys God's company and awaits us on our journey home to the Father.

The bible describes heaven as a banquet where all are invited to eat and drink in God's presence. The living food that we receive at Mass comes from God's heavenly table! It is 'bread from heaven' that is sent to nourish us on our pilgrim way.

When we celebrate Mass we are generally aware that we actually join with Jesus and the disciples at the Last Supper as we remember this great event. Rarely, however, do we recognise that we are also now joining in the heavenly banquet. When we celebrate the Eucharist we are pulling up our chairs to God's table in heaven! The food that is given us now is a foretaste and promise of what we will have in the future.

This is what gives Christians hope. Already now as our lives unfold and as we face the challenges that each day presents, we are strengthened by heavenly food. When we are inclined to depression or despair, when we are tempted to doubt or give-up, the promise of a better future is given to us now. And when we laugh and are happy because of the goodness and love of another, when we give thanks and rejoice at the mystery of life and the wonder of creation, we lift now lift a glass of heavenly brew to the God who makes it all possible.

At Mass one of the "mysteries of faith" that we say after the consecration of the bread and wine is "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come in glory." This summarises perfectly what we are trying to say. As we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist we become part of his passion and death (past). We also become part of his coming again (future).

The popular hymn *Panis Angelicus* tells us that as we receive the Eucharist we receive the "bread of angels":

Thus Angels' Bread is made  
the Bread of man today:  
the Living Bread from heaven  
with figures dost away:  
O wondrous gift indeed!  
the poor and lowly may  
upon their Lord and Master feed.

The Advent Christ is Lord of the past, of the present and of the future. The Eucharist and the sacraments make that a reality for us.

# THE ADVENT WREATH

## THE HISTORY OF THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent Wreath dates back to ancient celebrations of the winter solstice- that time of year when the sun reaches its southern most point and the days are dark and gloomy. Because they longed for the return of the sun's light, the ancients stopped all usual activity, sacrificed the use of their wagon wheels and hung them up, festooned with lights and greens in their celebration halls.

Here they awaited the return of their Sun God, thinking of the warmth and life he brought.

As Christians, we use the same meaningful custom to anticipate the feast of light and life: the nativity of Jesus. We think of the darkness that sometimes creeps into our lives and watch the growing hope and light as the prophets and Mary help us prepare for His saving Birth.



## SYMBOLISM OF THE ADVENT WREATH

The Advent Wreath is made in the shape of a circle, to express God's eternity. He has no beginning and no end. The evergreen symbolises that God is always with us and will never change. The four candles, one for each week of Advent, represent the thousands of years that the People of God awaited the promised Messiah. The purple candles are a reminder of the spirit of reconciliation, a turning back to God, which marks the Advent season. A rose candle, used on the third Sunday of Advent ("Gaudete or Joyful Sunday") symbolises joy and hope in awaiting Jesus' birthday.

The wreath is usually blessed with holy water on the first weekend of Advent at the Vigil Mass. A purple candle is lit and burns for the first week. On successive weeks the second purple candle is used, then the rose candle and finally the last purple candle. As Jesus' coming draws near, the brightness increases.

### *The Circular Form:*

This reminds us that God's love is eternal. It has no beginning or end.

### *The Evergreens:*

The evergreens like the pine, the cyprus and the peace plant, remain fresh and green through all the season. The evergreen leaves of the Wreath remind us that God's love never changes.

### *The Colour Purple:*

The colour purple can represent a call to conversion. Three of the candles are purple. They represent our need for renewal and heart conversion.

### *The Pink Candle:*

One candle on the Wreath is pink. Pink represents our joy and happiness because the one who makes all things new is at hand. We light this candle the third Sunday of Advent.

### *The White Candle:*

The white candle which is placed in the middle of the wreath on Christmas Day, represents the Christ Child born that day. His teaching will light our way to freedom in the coming year.

## REFLECTION ON THE WREATH

*The God-Shaped Hole*  
by Page Zyromski

We're born with a God-shaped hole in our hearts, one of the saints tells us. It's a space for God alone. Until we recognize what it is, we try to fill it up by stuffing earthly things into it - possessions, activities, self-importance. It's like trying to force the wrong piece of a jigsaw puzzle into a space not meant for it. We don't know why we're not satisfied, so we search for novelty in the things we cram into the hole.

It doesn't work. Nothing but God will fit the God-shaped hole. Advent is our time to unclog that hole, to clear out all the litter. What obstructions are blocking the space we, give to God in our lives? Are we offering him a temporary parking place until Christmas, or a permanent dwelling?

If we're faithful to this season year after year, something wonderful happens. We want to give God more and more room. The feeling lasts longer and longer after Christmas. The God-shaped hole enlarges! Each year it widens. Like a dilated pupil in the eye, people see more and more of God in us and less and less of our own willfulness. We're able to say with John the Baptist and the great saints, "He must increase and I must decrease."

One day we suddenly realize that when Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord," the God-shaped hole in her heart was the largest of all. Not only could people see God in her life, they could see him magnified, enlarged!

## BLESSING OF THE ADVENT WREATH

Christ came to bring us salvation and has promised to come again. Let us pray that we may be always ready to welcome him.  
R. Come, Lord Jesus.

Reader: That the keeping of Advent may open our hearts to God's love, we pray. R.

Reader: That the light of Christ may penetrate the darkness of sin, we pray. R.

Reader: That this wreath may constantly remind us to prepare for the coming of Christ, we pray. R.

Reader: That the Christmas season may fill us with peace and joy as we strive to follow the example of Jesus, we pray. R.

## PRAYER OF BLESSING

Loving Father, your Church joyfully awaits the coming of its Saviour, who enlightens our hearts and dispels the darkness of sin. Pour forth your blessings upon us as we light the candles of this wreath; may their light reflect the splendour of Christ, who is Lord, for ever and ever.

R. Amen.

Or:

Today we begin preparing to celebrate, with hope filled joy, the coming of the Lord at Christmas. We ask God's blessing on this wreath of evergreens.

The Word was the real light that gives light to everyone and he was coming into the world.

Let us pray: Father, all powerful Lord of Light, bless our wreath of evergreens with its candles. May our Advent be a time of preparation. Help us reflect on the power of light to dispel darkness in our world and in our lives. Touch our hearts with the warmth of your love. May the increasing light of these candles brighten our minds and hearts to be steadfast in faith, joyful in hope and untiring in love, so that we are ready, again to receive in true peace, Jesus, the Light of the World, our Lord and Saviour.

AMEN.

# THE JESSE TREE

The Jesse Tree is a very ancient custom. It is like the family tree of Jesus. Its name comes from Jesse, who was the father of King David. Jesse and King David were ancestors of Jesus. The Jesse tree shows us more of the important people in the Old Testament. It shows us how long they waited for a king. We know that Jesus is the king that God promised to send. We use the Jesse tree to remind us of God's promise.

## MAKE A JESSE TREE

Place the branch in a pot of dirt or gravel and cover the bucket with Christmas paper. Just use a dead branch. Attach a string or coloured ribbon to hang symbols from the branch.

## SYMBOLS

1. The seven days of creation around the base of the tree (Genesis). Symbols: Sun, Moon, Stars, Animals, Fish, Birds, Earth.
2. Adam and Eve (Genesis 2-3). Symbols: Tree, Serpent, Apple minus a bite.
3. Noah (Genesis 5:25-29). Symbols: Ark, Pairs of animals, Dove and Olive branch.
4. Abraham. Symbols: Torch, Sword, pilgrim staff.
5. Isaac (Genesis 22, 24, 26, 27). Symbols: Stone altar of sacrifices, bundle of twigs.
6. Jacob (Genesis 25/21-34, 27/1-41, 28/10-22, 29:30, 50/1-14). Symbols: Kettle, Ladder, Flower with twelve petals.
7. Joseph (Exodus 2:3:1/21-22, 14/15-31, 16, 17/1-7, 20/1-17). Symbols: Bucket, Well, Multi-coloured robe.
8. Moses. Symbols: Basket, table of law, Paschal Lamb, pillars of cloud and fire.
9. Jesse (Samuel 16). Symbols: Crimson robe, Shepherds' staff, rose.
10. David (1 Samuel 16/1-23, 17/41-54, 2 Samuel 2:4, 1 Kings 2/1-9). Symbols: Harp, Crown and Sceptre, Key, Six pointed star.
11. Solomon. (1 Kings 5-9: 10/4-25). Symbols: Temple, Scales of Justice
12. Mary (Matthew 1/8-25, 2/1-12, Luke 1/26-38, 2/1-35). Symbols: Lily, Stars around crown, Pierced heart.
13. Jesus (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John). Symbols: Manger, Cross, Crown, Angel, Trumpeter.



# IRISH TRADITIONS

Ireland, like most countries, has a number of Christmas traditions that are all of its own. Many of these customs have their root in the time when the Gaelic culture and religion of the country were being suppressed and it is perhaps because of that they have survived into modern times.

## THE CANDLE IN THE WINDOW

The placing of a lighted candle in the window of a house on Christmas eve is still practised today. It has a number of purposes but primarily it was an symbol of welcome to Mary and Joseph as they travelled looking for shelter. The candle also indicated a safe place for priests to perform Mass, as during Penal Times this was not allowed. A further element of the tradition is that the candle should be lit by the youngest member of the household and only be extinguished by a girl bearing the name 'Mary'.

## THE LADEN TABLE

After evening meal on Christmas eve the kitchen table was again set and on it were placed a loaf of bread filled with caraway seeds and raisins, a pitcher of milk and a large lit candle. The door to the house was left unlatched so that Mary and Joseph, or any wandering traveller, could avail of the welcome.

## THE WREN BOY PROCESSION

During Penal Times there was once a plot in a vilage against the local soldiers. They were surrounded and were about to be ambushed when a group of wrens pecked on their drums and awakened the soldiers. The plot failed and the wren became known as 'The Devil's bird'. On St. Stephens day a procession takes place where a pole with a holly bush is carried from house to house and families dress up in old clothes and with blackened faces. In olden times an actual wren would be killed and placed on top of the pole. This custom has to a large degree disappeared but the tradition of visiting from house to house on St Stephens Day has survived and is very much part of an Irish Christmas.

## DECORATION

The placing of a ring of Holly on doors originated in Ireland as Holly was one of the main plants that flourished at Christmas time and which gave the poor ample means with which to decorate their dwellings. All decorations are traditionally taken down on Little

Christmas (January 6th) and it is considered to be bad luck to take them down beforehand.

### NOLLAIG NA MBAN

The tradition of Little Christmas or Women's Christmas was very strong in Ireland. It was so called because Irish men would take on all the household duties for this day. Giving the women of the house a well earned day of rest. The tradition was that the women would then hold parties or go out to celebrate the day with their friends, sisters, mothers, and aunts. Children often made presents for their mothers and grandmothers to give thanks for all they do during the year.

### OÍCHE NOLLAG

le Máire Mhac an tSaoi

Le coinnle na n-aingeal tá an spéir amuigh breactha,  
Tá fiacail an tseaca sa ghaoith ón gcnoc,  
Adaigh an tine is téir chun na leapan,  
Luífidh Mac Dé ins an tigh seo anocht.

Fágaidh an doras ar leathadh ina coinne,  
An mhaighdean a thioctfaidh is a naí ar a hucht,  
Deonaigh do shuaimhneas a ligint, a Mhuire,  
Luíodh Mac Dé ins an tigh seo anocht.

Bhí soilse ar lasadh i dtigh sin na haíochta,  
Cóiriú gan caoile, bia agus deoch,  
Do cheannaithe olla, do cheannaithe síoda,  
Ach luífidh Mac Dé ins an tigh seo anocht.

