



INTRODUCTION

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night and spring after winter.

RACHEL CARSON

Those who contemplate the liturgical seasons are in a similar place.

In this booklet, we focus on what is “infinitely healing” in the undercurrents of Advent hope and anticipation; the early darkness with stars shining like “angels giving glory to God”; the ancient longing of the “O” Antiphons; the familiar and tender stories of Christmas Eve; the exuberant generosity of God’s gift of Jesus;

the symbolic treasures of the Magi; and the charismatic emergence of John the Baptizer.

As Catholic Christians, the liturgical year is our compass, directing us toward ever-new experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It invites us to glimpse mysteries of faith we may have previously overlooked. It teaches us to go deeper into God by reflecting often on the words and actions of Jesus. It reveals to us the flow of joy, sorrow, longing, hope, death, and resurrection in Jesus' life—and in every life.

Through this booklet we invite intergenerational learning groups, catechists, RCIA teams, confirmation candidates and sponsors, parish study groups, and all parishioners to let the liturgical year reveal its “reserves of strength” and offer “infinite healing” through its repeated refrains. Above all, be open to its blessed assurance that “dawn comes after night and spring after winter.”



Advent

Daylight grows shorter. The dark of night grows longer and more intense. A spirit of expectation begins to pick up momentum: shopping trips, gift wrapping, parties, a different kind of music and song, and an avalanche of decorations. Something wonderful is about to happen. Young and old alike prepare to celebrate Christmas by taking part in a great variety of traditions, some of them only remotely associated with preparation for the Christian mystery of the Messiah's birth.

Advent is the beginning of the church's liturgical year, and the First Sunday of Advent always falls on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew, November 30. Advent looks forward to the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, both the historical event itself and the saving event of the coming of God in flesh, Christ's return at the end of the world, and his coming into our lives every day.

The word "Advent" (Latin *adventus*, "coming") originally described the whole mystery of the Incarnation. The conception of Jesus was an Advent, but so was his birth and what will be his final coming at the endtimes.

ORIGINS OF ADVENT

Once Christmas became popular, Advent evolved as a liturgical season. In ancient times, people tended to precede a time of feasting with a

time of fasting. There

are hints of a peni-

tential season at

this time of the

year in the late

5th century

in Spain and

Gaul (rough-

ly, today's

France and the

Lowlands). These

areas had links to the

Eastern church, which cele-

brated its Nativity feast on January

6, called Epiphany. They approached this feast with forty

days of fasting and penance, very similar to Lent, possibly

because Epiphany was seen as a time for baptism, as was

the Easter Vigil at the end of Lent.

By the mid-6th century, the church in Rome had be-

gun to focus on days of penance that occurred on the

Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday after the feast of St.

Lucy (December 13). The reason lay in a five-day pagan

harvest festival of Saturnalia, from December 17-23. On



December 17, sacrifice was offered to Saturn, god of agriculture. The days following were filled with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. It seems that the church tried to offset the influence of this popular pagan festival with days of fasting, prayer, and penance as it looked ahead to the feast of Nativity on December 25.

There is also an ancient tradition of singing the O Antiphons during the Liturgy of Hours on precisely the same days as the pagan Saturnalia. The singing of these O Antiphons, always an Advent tradition, is still popular today, and they have become the Alleluia verses at Mass for December 17-23:

- (*O Sapientia*) Come, Wisdom of our God...
- (*O Adonai*) Come, Leader of Ancient Israel...
- (*O Radix Jesse*) Come, Flower of Jesse's Stem...
- (*O Clavis David*) Come, Key of David...
- (*O Oriens*) Come, Radiant Dawn...
- (*O Rex Gentium*) Come, King of all Nations...
- (*O Emmanuel*) Come, Emmanuel...

ADVENT TRADITIONS

Some religious traditions during the month of December are directly associated with the themes of Advent. Others are already part of the celebration of Christmas but are anticipated during the weeks of Advent.

ADVENT WREATH

Advent traditions reflect a spirit of expectation and, therefore, unfold gradually. Probably the most popular tradition today is the lighting of candles on an Advent Wreath. This custom originated among Lutherans in Germany in the 16th century and became popular in other areas. Along with the Christmas tree, it is probably an example of Christianizing practices popular from pre-Christian times. There had always been a festival of burning special lights and fire at the end of November and beginning of December in Germanic lands as the darkness of winter becomes more severe.

The Advent Wreath is made of evergreens and is placed on a table or suspended from the ceiling. There are four candles, one for each week of Advent. The color of the candles is not essential because the symbolism is primarily in the flame. It is popular, however, to have three of them be violet or purple, the traditional color of Advent. One is rose, the traditional color of the Third Sunday of Advent, originally called Gaudete (“Rejoice”) Sunday



from the first word of the entrance antiphon for Mass.

After the wreath is blessed on the first Sunday of Advent, a prayer is prayed and a candle lit. This ceremony repeats on each of the following three Sundays. Light increases, pushing out darkness, with another candle lit until all four are burning.

Wreaths are symbolic of victory and glory. The symbolism of the Advent Wreath goes beyond this. It lies in the tension between darkness and light. It represents the long time when people lived in spiritual darkness, waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the light of the world. Each year in Advent people wait once again in darkness for the coming of the Lord, his historical coming in the mystery of Bethlehem, his final coming at the end of time, and his special coming in every moment of grace.

JESSE TREE

Biblical persons associated with the coming of the Messiah are represented by the tradition of the Jesse Tree, named after the father of David. Symbols are gradually added to the tree or branch. They represent ancestors of Jesus, either in faith or bloodline, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesse, David, Solomon, Joseph, and Mary.

ADVENT CALENDAR

The four weeks before Christmas can be designed into a special Advent calendar of personal preparation. The days are marked with goals toward personal conversion or service to be done for others.



Christmas

Christmas is no longer just a Christian liturgical feast. Over the centuries it has become a seasonal mood, not limited to believers who prepare for and rejoice over the birth of Jesus. Almost every aspect of society celebrates the season in some way.

Despite the secular overtones of the season, the word “Christmas” underscores its profound Christian and spiritual significance. It has been used in English-speaking countries since the Middle Ages; the word was derived from the Old English *Cristes Maesse*, or “Mass of Christ.”

With the Father’s gift of Jesus as a model, Christmas also celebrates the mystery of giving—and receiving—both with and without Christian faith. Finally, Christmas incorporates numerous pre-Christian traditions concerning the winter solstice along with the legends of St. Nicholas that gave rise to the modern creation of Santa Claus.

ORIGIN OF CHRISTMAS



The primitive church seems to have had little or no interest in the actual date of Jesus' birth. They celebrated the mystery of his resurrection weekly and annually. Martyrs and saints were honored with anniversary festivals before celebrating the Nativity became a tradition. Eventually, however, the

church's desire to live out liturgically the entire Christ mystery led to a Nativity festival. Another possible reason is the church's response to the influence of early heresies, especially Docetism, that denied the human nature of Jesus.

The actual date of Christ's birth is unknown. The gospels do not record it, nor is there any early tradition to identify it. There are two traditional dates: December 25 in the Western church and January 6 in the Eastern church. Both have been celebrated by the church as memorials of Jesus' birth, the latter becoming the feast of Epiphany. Neither of them, however, is recognized as the actual date today.

DATE OF CHRISTMAS

Rome had a Nativity festival by 336 and probably a generation or so earlier. There is still disagreement among scholars concerning the reason why these early Christians of the late 3rd and early 4th century chose to celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25. Theories, still popular today, are based on three tendencies of the early Christians: their high respect for symbolism, their natural tendency to borrow from the real world around them, and their attempts to offset the influence of pagan festivals.

Earthy symbolism is very powerful at this time of the year in the northern hemisphere. Each year, the darkness of night begins creeping up on daylight as days became shorter and nights longer. At the winter solstice this situation changes and the light of day begins once again to defeat the darkness of night. The winter solstice occurred on December 25 in the ancient Julian calendar and became the popular date for Christmas. As noted in the origin of Advent, a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia devoted to Saturn, the god of agriculture, occurred shortly before the winter solstice. It was celebrated with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. Did Christians turn their hearts to the mystery of Christ's birth to offset this pagan celebration?

