



The Catholic Tradition of the Advent Wreath

By Erin McGeever

The Advent Wreath is part of our Catholic tradition. However, the origins of it are uncertain. There is evidence of early Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold, dark December days as a sign of hope for the future warmth of springtime. During the Scandinavian winters, lit candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to turn “the wheel of the earth” back toward the sun and warmth.

During the Middle Ages, Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their preparation for Christmas. Christ is “the Light that came into the world” sent to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the love of God (Jn 3:19-21). Around 1600, Catholics and Lutherans developed more prayers involving the Advent wreath.

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is rich. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying the circle of life. The various evergreens have meanings that mirror our faith:

- laurel signifies victory
- pine and holly signify immortality
- cedar signifies strength and healing

The circle of the wreath, with no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. Pinecones or nuts used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life. The abundance of evergreens depicts the immortality of our souls and the everlasting life promised to us through Christ and his Passion.

The four candles represent the four weeks of Advent. Three candles are purple, and one is rose colored. The purple candles symbolize prayer, penance and good works that we undertake during Advent. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday. Gaudete Sunday is

a day of rejoicing as having arrived at the midpoint of Advent. The progressive lighting of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world, his coming now and the anticipation of his coming in the future.

The lit candles signify Christ, the light of the world. Recent adaptations include a white candle placed in the middle of the wreath, which represents Christ, and it is lit on Christmas Eve. Another tradition is to replace the three purple and one rose candle with four white candles, lit throughout Christmas season.

For more information and resources, visit these three websites:

<https://www.usccb.org/resources/what-advent-wreath>

<https://www.usccb.org/prayers/blessing-advent-wreath>

<https://www.catholicicing.com/advent-wreaths-101-everything-you-need-to-know/>

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