

Catholic

UPDATE

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DECEMBER 2017

Advent and Christmas Signs and Symbols

CREATIONS OF BELIEVERS

A REDEMPTORIST PASTORAL PUBLICATION

When we assess the Church year, Christmas is second only to Easter in importance. We celebrate the Incarnation and the significance of Jesus becoming united with human nature—the human flesh being a symbol of this poignant event.

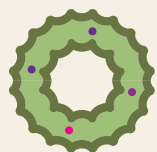


SHUTTERSTOCK

Faith is continually expressed in cultural and historical symbols, and it's important that they pervade the culture in which they live. We use the symbols of the past and participate in the slow process of creating our own symbols and practices in line with the spirit of family and of our faith community. In this way we pass on the faith from generation to generation by means of our creeds, signs, and symbols. The symbols of Advent and the Christmas season are the creations of believing Christians who have prepared for and celebrated the birth of Christ over the ages. These symbols provide a tangible way for us to embrace and celebrate the encounter the season represents.

We use natural elements and objects such as water, bread, wine, oil, candles, statues, stained-glass windows, and beads (to mention just a few) to help us focus and celebrate our relationship with God. During the season of Advent, many of these natural elements and objects assist us in preparing for the birth of Christ.

Advent Wreath



One of the most common symbols used during Advent is the Advent wreath, usually made of evergreen branches formed into a circle. It holds four candles: three purple (or dark blue) and one pink. The purple candles symbolize the time of preparation and are lit at the beginning of the first, second, and fourth Sundays of Advent. The pink candle, lit at the beginning of the third week of Advent, symbolizes our focus on rejoicing during this penitential season. There is a similar Sunday in Lent.

Many families make a small Advent wreath for use at home. Although the candles on the wreath in church are lit only on Sundays, the candles on the family's wreath usually are lit each night of the week, accompanied with a variety of prayers or rituals. Some families place a white or light-colored candle in the middle of the Advent wreath on Christmas Eve to symbolize the coming of the Christ Child. This candle symbolizes the connection between the Old and the New Testaments. Whatever is chosen, prayers and rituals should be appropriate and relevant to all members of the family.



The Christmas Tree

Some claim that Martin Luther was the first to take home a tree and use it as a Christmas

decoration. There is evidence, however, that indicates the practice developed out of the medieval religious paradise play in which a fir tree decorated with apples was used to symbolize the tree of the knowledge of good and evil mentioned in Genesis 2:9. The

play told the story of creation and of the sin of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from paradise. It usually ended with the consoling promise of the coming of the Savior and the story of Bethlehem. Obviously, this made the paradise play a favorite pageant for Advent, usually performed outdoors in front of the church or inside the church. If the pageant was performed inside, lighted candles were placed around the tree, and the play was actually staged within the circle of light that was emitted. After these plays were no longer performed in the churches, the Paradise Tree found its way into the homes of the faithful, becoming a symbol of the coming of the Savior.

By the fifteenth century, a fir tree decorated with apples was a common tradition. Gradually, small white wafers were added to the apples as decorations for the tree—the wafers symbolized the Eucharist. The meaning was richly symbolic and deeply rooted in faith and Scripture: The tree that bore apples—a representation of the sin of Adam and Eve—also displayed the saving fruit of the Eucharist. Later, the wafers were replaced by pieces of white pastry cut in the form of stars, angels, hearts, flowers, and bells, as well as brown cookies shaped in the form of people, birds, dogs, roosters, and other animals.

By the middle of the seventeenth century, candles—representing Christ as the Light of the World—were placed on the tree. Eventually, glass decorations accompanied the cookies and fruit on the tree—a visual representation of the modern-day Christmas tree. The tradition, developed in Germany, gradually became accepted in other countries. It found its way into the United States by way of the German immigrants in Pennsylvania.



DIG DEEPER

Consider how you can share the story of faith behind the signs and symbols of the season.

How can you and your family work toward a more meaningful celebration?

Consider how you can work toward a deeper encounter this season and in the year ahead.