

Advent

Many Christians attending church the next four Sundays will see the celebrant wearing purple. It is the liturgical colour for Advent, the four weeks leading to Christmas.

Advent means “coming.” The season has two components. From ancient times, the first part has looked forward in joyful hope to the coming of Christ in glory at the end of the ages (the First Sunday).

The second phase shifts to the announcement of his coming in history. The annunciation by the Angel of the Lord to Joseph or Mary told of the Child to be born in Bethlehem (the Fourth Sunday).

Between these two poles, the liturgy animates Christians to the proper dispositions for receiving Christ at his coming. The Gospel recounts John the Baptist’s heralding of Jesus, “the Coming One” (the Second and Third Sundays).

Because we anticipate Christmas more strongly as the weeks progress, the third Sunday is called “Gaudete” or “Rejoicing” Sunday. On this day, clergy may wear rose-coloured vestments instead of royal purple.

The celebration of Advent has evolved over the centuries. For example, in Spain and Gaul in the fourth and fifth centuries, new Christians prepared during Advent for their baptism at Epiphany in early January. This feast celebrates God’s incarnation in three specific episodes in Jesus’ life and ministry: first, the visit of the Magi to the Child Jesus, then Jesus’ Baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and finally, Jesus’ first recorded miracle at the wedding feast of Cana.

During this ancient season of preparation, Christians would spend forty days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare for this celebration.

Originally, there was little connection between Advent and Christmas.

By the sixth century, however, Roman Christians had tied Advent to the future coming of Christ...his second coming in the clouds as the judge of the world. It was only in the Middle Ages that the Advent season was explicitly linked to Christ's birth.

The Church's year begins with Advent. Advent is a season of preparation, although many now neglect it. Too often, the "holiday season" overshadows the season of Advent as people celebrate Christmas early. By the time the actual solemnity of Christmas arrives, many people feel burned out. They are tired of the hype. Christmas can become anticlimactic.

The malls already play Christmas music and decorations are present everywhere. How can we give Christmas its proper twelve days of rejoicing between December 25 and the celebration of the Epiphany? The build-up of the "holiday season" can overwhelm us. We decorate our churches and houses for Christmas. We spend more time shopping than in prayer. We attend Christmas parties before the season has arrived. It is an enormous challenge to remain faithful to the Advent season in a society that does not take the time to reflect and prepare as the Church encourages Christians to do.

As Catholics, we must celebrate Advent differently. Paying closer attention to the four weeks of Advent can help us overcome this early focus. One simple act would be to begin displaying a figure of baby Jesus in the crèche only on Christmas morning.

Although hard to keep in mind in the midst of holiday revelry, shopping, and joyful carols, the Church intends Advent to be a season of spiritual discipline (fasting and prayer). Reflection on the violence and evil in the world compels believers to cry out to God to make things right—to put death's dark shadows to flight.

The promise for the Christian church resides in the Lord Jesus Christ. He has come and he will return. This is the key to understanding Advent.