

The Symbolism of the Advent Wreath

During the time of Advent, many people have an Advent wreath in their homes. While these decorations are certainly festive and add to the holiday spirit, there is also much symbolism in the wreath that people may not recognize.

First, the **wreath** is always in the form of a **circle**. Since a circle has no beginning and no end, it is a symbol for God, Who is eternal and without beginning or end.

The Advent wreath is always made from **evergreens**. These branches, as the name indicates, are "ever green" -- ever alive. They are symbolic of Christ, Who died, but Who is alive, never to die again. The evergreen branches also symbolize our soul's immortality. Christ came into the world to give us never-ending life. Entwined around the circle of evergreens are **red holly berries**. They look like large red drops of blood, and symbolize the blood shed by Christ for mankind. They remind us that Christ came into this world to die for us and redeem us. It is through the shedding of His blood that we have eternal life.

The wreath has **four candles**, three violet ones and one rose colored candle. These symbolize the four weeks of the Advent season, our time of preparation for Christmas. Each day, the Liturgy tells us of the Hebrew expectation of the Messiah in the Old Testament reading, and the Gospels begin to introduce us to the characters of the Christmas story. At the beginning of Advent a single candle is lit, but each week another candle is lit. As the light from the wreath increases each week as more candles are lit, the wreath reminds us that the birth of the Light of the World is coming closer. So may our souls grow brighter in their love for, and anticipation of, the Christ Child as this season of grace continues.

The color of the four candles also has significance. The **violet** candles have a penitential appearance, much as we find violet in the church during the penitential season of Lent. The violet is to remind us that Advent is a season of preparation in which we should be spiritually preparing our souls to receive Christ on Christmas. The single **rose** colored candle is lit on the third Sunday of Advent, which is called "Gaudete" Sunday. "Gaudete" is the Latin word for "rejoice", and symbolizes an element of rejoicing in the midst of our penitential preparation, for the joy of Christmas is almost here. The rose color is made by mixing violet with white. It is almost as if the joy we celebrate at Christmas (symbolized by bright white) cannot contain itself during this penitential season (violet) and burst forth a bit into the Advent season. On Christmas, the four candles are replaced with **white** ones -- our time of preparation is over and we enter a time of great joy.

At the base of each candle, or in the wreath itself, there should be a **blue bowl**. This blue is to remind us of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, who bore Him in her womb and brought Him forth into our world on Christmas.

The Advent wreath should be placed in a prominent place in our church. Many families have a smaller Advent wreath in their homes. This both reminds families of the wreath in their church and serves as a reminder of their link to the parish church. The candles are lit at the main meal of the day, with the new candle lit preferably at the main meal on Sunday, the first day of the new week. Joining around the table for a meal should remind the family of the table of the Lord around which they gather each week to celebrate the Eucharist -- the meal of the Lord that nourishes our soul.

So, the next time you see or display an Advent wreath, don't just think of it as a nice decoration. Remember all the symbolism it has for us as it reminds us of the need for spiritual preparation to fully share in the great joy of the birth of Christ, the Son of God Who gave His life for us so that we might have eternal life.