

# The Advent Wreath

Adapted from an article by Rev. William Saunders in the *Arlington Catholic Herald*.

Advent wreaths are available in Christian stores near you, but most come in sets of four candles. You may have to improvise on the fifth or center candle. And if you are making your own advent wreath, materials can be bought from any department stores at the mall.



For guidance on what to assemble, go to

<http://www.catholicculture.org/liturgicalyear/activities/view.cfm?id=954>.

## Beginnings

The Advent wreath is part of our long-standing Catholic tradition. However, the actual origins are uncertain. There is evidence of pre-Christian Germanic peoples using wreaths with lit candles during the cold and dark December days as a sign of hope in the future warm and extended-sunlight days of Spring. In Scandinavia during Winter, lighted candles were placed around a wheel, and prayers were offered to the god of light to turn “the wheel of the earth” back toward the sun to lengthen the days and restore warmth.

By the Middle Ages, the Christians adapted this tradition and used Advent wreaths as part of their spiritual preparation for Christmas. After all, Christ is “the Light that came into the world” to dispel the darkness of sin and to radiate the truth and love of God (cf. John 3:19-21). By 1600, both Catholics and Lutherans had more formal practices surrounding the Advent wreath.

## Symbolisms

The symbolism of the Advent wreath is beautiful. The wreath is made of various evergreens, signifying continuous life. Even these evergreens have a traditional meaning which can be adapted to our faith: The laurel signifies victory over persecution and suffering; pine, holly, and yew, immortality; and cedar, strength and healing. Holly also has a special Christian symbolism:

The **prickly leaves** remind us of the crown of thorns, and one English legend tells of how the cross was made of holly. The **circle** of the wreath, which has no beginning or end, symbolizes the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life found in Christ. **Any pine cones, nuts, or seedpods** used to decorate the wreath also symbolize life and resurrection. **All together**, the wreath of evergreens depicts the immortality of our soul and the new, everlasting life promised to us through Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who entered our world becoming true man and who was victorious over sin and death through His own passion, death, and resurrection.

**The four candles around the wreath represent the four weeks of Advent.** A tradition is that each week represents one thousand years, to sum to the 4,000 years from Adam and Eve until the Birth of the Savior. Three candles are purple and one is rose.

The purple candles in particular symbolize the prayer, penance, and preparatory sacrifices and good works undertaken at this time. The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday, Gaudete Sunday, that is the Sunday of rejoicing, because the faithful have arrived at the midpoint of Advent, when their preparation is now half over and they are close to Christmas.

**A fifth candle, white, is placed in the middle of the wreath to represent Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve.**

The **progressive lighting** of the candles symbolizes the expectation and hope surrounding our Lord's first coming into the world and the anticipation of His second coming to judge the living and the dead. The **light** again signifies Christ, the Light of the world.

### **Procedures and Prayers**

In family practice, the Advent wreath is most appropriately lit at dinner time after the blessing of the food. A traditional prayer service using the Advent wreath proceeds as follows:

On the First Sunday of Advent, the father of the family blesses the wreath, praying: ***“O God, by whose word all things are sanctified, pour forth Thy blessing upon this wreath, and grant that we who use it may prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ and may receive from Thee abundant graces. Who livest and reignest forever. Amen.”***

He then continues for each of the days of the first week of Advent, ***“O Lord, stir up Thy might, we beg thee, and come, that by Thy protection we may deserve to be rescued from the threatening dangers of our sins and saved by Thy deliverance. Who livest and reignest forever. Amen.”*** The youngest child then lights one purple candle.

During the second week of Advent, the father prays: ***“O Lord, stir up our hearts that we may prepare for Thy only begotten Son, that through His coming we may be made worthy to serve Thee with pure minds. Who livest and reignest forever. Amen.”*** The oldest child then lights the purple candle from the first week plus one more purple candle.

During the third week of Advent, the father prays: ***“O Lord, we beg Thee, incline Thy ear to our prayers and enlighten the darkness of our minds by the grace of Thy visitation. Who livest and reignest forever. Amen.”*** The mother then lights the two previously lit purple candles plus the rose candle.

During the fourth week of Advent, the father prays ***“O Lord, stir up Thy power, we pray Thee, and come; and with great might help us, that with the help of Thy grace, Thy merciful forgiveness may hasten what our sins impede. Who livest and reignest forever. Amen.”*** The father then lights all of the candles of the wreath.

On Christmas eve, the father prays ***“O Lord, because on this day, your Word became flesh in our Savior Jesus Christ, was born of a woman, and walked among us as a man. Help us to imitate your incarnation, by manifesting our faith in our conduct as well as in our speech. To you, O Lord, we give our honor, praise, worship, and love, in the most holy and precious name of the One who is born today; because He lives and reigns with you in your glory, and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, Amen.”*** All the candles are then lighted.