

# Advent: The Church expectant



## The origins of Advent and Christmas

The present pattern of a four week Advent season followed by a Christmas season spanning the feasts of Jesus' birth and baptism disguises a long and complex history. In spite of intensive efforts by liturgical scholars a definitive account of the origins of the Advent season and the feasts of Christmas and the Epiphany has proved elusive.

## Advent

The season of Advent is peculiar to the Western church. It has no counterpart in the East. Outside of Rome it may have arisen as a three or six week period of preparation for baptism on the feast of the Epiphany. Administering baptism on this day would have appealed at a time when the baptism of Jesus was the primary "epiphany" being celebrated (along with other revelations of Jesus' identity such as the visit of the Magi, the wedding feast at Cana and the transfiguration).

When the birth of Christ came to be observed in Rome on 25<sup>th</sup> December in the fourth century, Christmas was taken to be the beginning of the year. Thus Advent, once it took shape, served as the conclusion of the year. It was characterised by an emphasis on Christ's coming in glory at the end of time rather than on preparation for his nativity. Certainly in the time of Gregory the Great (590-604) Advent was eschatological rather than incarnational. It was Gregory who shortened the season from six weeks to four.

Eventually a four week season became universal in the Western church that combined three themes: spiritual discipline (arising from preparation

for baptism or from Ember Days), preparation for Christmas (originating in places such as North Italy before being adopted in Rome), and the last times. It was only in the 10<sup>th</sup> century with the merger of Roman and Frankish liturgical traditions that Advent came to be understood as the beginning of the church's year. By the time liturgical books came to be standardised in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries a four week Advent season focussed on John the Baptist and on the parousia was established as the norm.

## **Contemporary Advent**

### Context

No season of the year is more at odds with the prevailing culture in Australia than Advent. The advertising blitz for the Christmas shopping binge, reinforced by Christmas decor in shops, stores and streets, starts several weeks prior to Advent. To make matters worse, all this commercial Christmas decoration disappears on Christmas night to make way for the Boxing Day sales.

It's a busy time of the year. Schools and colleges are marking the end of the school year with exams, graduation ceremonies and farewells. Businesses are holding end-of-the year parties. Time and energy go into sending Christmas greetings of one kind or another. Families are occupied with plans for Christmas Day meals and summer holidays. There's a spirit of indulgence in the air, congruent with the languor of summer days.

### Advent: the twofold coming of Christ

By contrast, this is what the Church says about Advent. "Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnity of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ's Second Coming at the end of

time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight.” (UNLYGRC #39, 1969)

### The liturgy of Advent

The season begins with First Vespers of the Sunday on or nearest to 30<sup>th</sup> November and ends before the First Vespers of Christmas (ie on Christmas Eve). Depending on the day of the week that Christmas falls, Advent can be as short as three weeks and one day or as long as full four weeks, but there are always four Sundays.

### *The Sunday pattern*

Two independent yet inter-related patterns, the Sunday and the weekday, are in play. The Sunday pattern centres on the Gospel reading. On the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday the Gospel heralds the end times. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> it highlights the mission of John the Baptist, while on the 4<sup>th</sup> it turns attention to the forthcoming Nativity of Christ. The Old Testament readings consist of messianic prophecies, mostly from Isaiah, while the second readings are season-related extracts from the writings of the apostles.

### *The weekday pattern*

The weekdays of Advent are divided into two unequal sections. Working backwards, the second section consists of the final eight days leading up to Christmas, ie 17<sup>th</sup>-24<sup>th</sup> December. These days have their own combination of readings and prayers, including a Preface for the Eucharistic Prayer that invites prayerful preparation for the Nativity in company with Mary and the Baptist. The readings come from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, with relevant Old Testament texts, especially the messianic prophecies. During this time the church prays a set of special antiphons dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century (known as the “O” antiphons from their first word) for the Magnificat at Evening Prayer. In sum, these eight days serve to prepare more explicitly for the birth of Jesus.

The first section of Advent weekdays is itself divided into two parts. Up until the Thursday of the second week, the first readings are taken in a sequence from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospels (by way of exception) chosen to complement them. Together they offer a powerful word of reassurance and comfort. The Isaian texts are full of the promise of salvation, peace, joy and forgiveness; the Gospel texts recount Jesus' encouraging teachings and his ministry of healing and mercy.

From that Thursday until 17<sup>th</sup> December, the Gospels focus on the figure of John the Baptist, with the first reading either related to the Gospel or taken from Isaiah.

### *Advent prefaces*

There are two prefaces specific to the Advent season. The first is for use up until the 16<sup>th</sup> December (feast days aside); it links the two comings of Christ – his incarnation and his return in glory – to evoke joyful confidence in God's saving design. The second is used from 17<sup>th</sup> December for the remainder of the season. With its more explicit reference to the approaching Nativity and especially to Mary and John the Baptist, it invites watchful prayer and exultant praise.

Always falling in the first part of Advent is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It has its own full range of proper texts, including a preface. This celebration inserts a Marian moment in the eschatological phase of the season, anticipating the sustained focus on Mary in the second and incarnational phase.

### The spirit of Advent

The spirit of Advent is one of hope, patient expectation, joy and contemplation. Its successive emphases on the coming of Christ – first his parousia and then his incarnation – are held together by the constant coming of Christ in word and sacrament. It is in the eucharistic

celebrations of Advent that that Christ is experienced as “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13).

Although Advent is not a penitential season, the angelic hymn – the *Gloria* – is omitted, as in Lent, thus giving dramatic impact to its reappearance on Christmas Eve. The pre-Vatican II observance of Ember Days – days of supplication and fasting associated with the beginning of spring, summer, autumn and winter – may still continue under norms established by Conferences of Bishops (UNLYGRC ##45-47).

From both a secular and a liturgical point of view Advent is also a suitable time for the sacrament of reconciliation. The looming end of the calendar year and the season’s focus on the two comings of Christ combine to invite believers to take stock of their relationships – with God, self, others and creation.

## **Liturgical features**

### Silence

Silence is a much ignored and under-rated element of liturgical prayer. The Advent season is a most suitable time to take full advantage of the several explicit references to silent prayer in the Roman Missal, such as after each reading and after Communion (*GIRM* #56). Some brief catechesis may be of value to enable the faithful to make good use of these opportunities for prayer.

### Liturgical colour

Violet is the colour of the Advent season. A lighter shade could be chosen for vestments to distinguish the hopeful spirit of Advent from the penitential character of Lent. Rose is an approved colour for the third Sunday.

Mindful that the figure of Mary is evoked both on the Solemnity of the

Immaculate Conception and through the last week of Advent, a seasonal colour that hints at the traditional blue associated with Mary could be appropriate.

## Environment

The liturgical setting should be one of simplicity and restraint to reinforce the season's spirit of prayerful vigilance (*GIRM* #305). This will be in stark contrast to the Christmas decorations that have adorned stores and streets and offices for several weeks.

Attention could be drawn to stained glass windows, icons or statues that feature Mary or John the Baptist.

## *Advent wreath*

The custom of displaying and lighting the candles of an Advent wreath has become widespread. The practice may stem from pagan rites for the winter solstice which found their way into 17<sup>th</sup> century domestic devotions in Germany and then into the liturgy during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though there is no mention of it in the Roman Missal, the Book of Blessings (1989) contains an Order for the Blessing of an Advent Wreath, within either Mass (#1517-20) or a Celebration of the Word (#1521-33).

Traditionally the wreath is shaped into a circle of evergreen branches that house four candles, one for each week of the season, three being violet and one rose. The use of Australian native flora is to be commended. It should be of sufficient size to be visible to the whole assembly and may be either hung from the ceiling or placed on a stand, but without obscuring the altar, lectern or chair (#1512).

The blessing takes place only on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent; on the remaining Sundays the candles are lit either before Mass begins or before the opening collect, without additional rites or prayers (#1513).

## Music

Like the worship space, the music of the Advent season is meant to be simple and restrained (cf. *GIRM* #313), apart from festive occasions such as the Immaculate Conception. In order to respect the particular character of each season, it is best to choose appropriate Advent hymnody rather than Christmas carols.

## Liturgy of the Hours

Given the prayerful character of the season, Advent is a most suitable time to celebrate a simple communal form of Morning or Evening Prayer. In particular, Evening Prayer during the last eight days before Christmas, with its special “O” antiphons for the *Magnificat*, helps the community to prepare well for the feast of the Nativity. The ready availability of various editions of the Prayer of the Church makes this quite feasible.

## Devotions

### *Jesse tree*

While the custom has not become popular in Australia, setting up a Jesse tree can serve a good catechetical and spiritual purpose. As the days and weeks of Advent go by, the names or symbols of Jesus’ ancestors and of key figures from the Old Testament can be added to heighten the community’s sense of expectation. As the Jesse tree is not a liturgical item, it does not belong in the main arena of liturgical action, but in the porch or a side chapel.

### *Carol service*

While carols have been played over and over in stores long before Christmas, their proper home is in the Christmas season. The pastoral opportunity offered by a parish or local carol service before Christmas should not be ignored, but every effort should be made to choose songs

that are Advent in spirit and do not unduly anticipate the feast that is to come. They are best chosen to complement the Scripture readings and prayers that form the substance of the service.

### *Christmas crib*

The custom of erecting a Christmas crib has its origins in the nativity plays of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, but it was the incarnational imagination of Francis of Assisi that established the crib's popularity. Like the Advent wreath, the crib is not mentioned in the Roman Missal but is referred to in the Book of Blessings. Two Orders of Blessing for a Christmas manger or nativity scene are included, one within the celebration of the word of God (#1547-61), the other within Mass (#1562-69).

The directions are few: the blessing may take place on the Vigil of Christmas or at another pastorally suitable time (#1542); if the crib is located inside the church, it should be in a place that is accessible and suitable for prayer and devotion but not in the sanctuary (#1544); and the blessing may be given by a priest, deacon or lay minister (#1546). Nothing is said about the placing of the image of the infant Jesus, but this ought not be done until the Vigil.

### *Christmas tree*

The Book of Blessings also contains an Order of Blessing for a Christmas tree. The introduction states that if a tree is to be set up in church this should take place only just before Christmas. Care needs to be taken to ensure it is decorated in a church-appropriate way and does not interfere with the liturgical action (#1571). It may be blessed on or before Christmas during a celebration of the word of God or the Prayer of the Church (#1572).