
INTRODUCTION

Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts. There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night and spring after winter. ☞ RACHEL CARSON

Those who contemplate the liturgical seasons are in a similar place.

In this booklet, we focus on what is “infinitely healing” in the undercurrents of Advent hope and anticipation; the early darkness with stars shining like “angels giving glory to God”; the ancient longing of the “O” Antiphons; the familiar and tender stories of Christmas Eve; the exuberant generosity of God’s gift of Jesus; the symbolic treasures of the Magi; and the charismatic emergence of John the Baptizer.

As Catholic Christians, the liturgical year is our compass, directing us toward ever-new experiences of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It invites us to glimpse

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mysteries of faith we may have previously overlooked. It teaches us to go deeper into God by reflecting often on the words and actions of Jesus. It reveals to us the flow of joy, sorrow, longing, hope, death, and resurrection in Jesus' life—and in every life.

Through this booklet we invite intergenerational learning groups, catechists, RCIA teams, confirmation candidates and sponsors, parish study groups, and all parishioners to let the liturgical year reveal its “reserves of strength” and offer “infinite healing” through its repeated refrains. Above all, be open to its blessed assurance that “dawn comes after night and spring after winter.”

ADVENT

Daylight grows shorter. The dark of night grows longer and more intense. A spirit of expectation begins to pick up momentum: shopping trips, gift wrapping, parties, a different kind of music and song, and an avalanche of decorations. Something wonderful is about to happen. Young and old alike prepare to celebrate Christmas by taking part in a great variety of traditions, some of them only remotely associated with preparation for the Christian mystery of the Messiah's birth.

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Advent is the beginning of the church's liturgical year, and the First Sunday of Advent always falls on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew, November 30. Advent looks forward to the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, both the historical event itself and the saving event of the coming of God in flesh, Christ's return at the end of the world, and his coming into our lives every day.

The word "Advent" (Latin *adventus*, "coming") originally described the whole mystery of the Incarnation. The conception of Jesus was an Advent, but so was his birth and what will be his final coming at the endtimes.

Origins of Advent

Once Christmas became popular, Advent evolved as a liturgical season. In ancient times, people tended to precede a time of feasting with a time of fasting. There are hints of a penitential season at this time of the year in the late 5th century in Spain and Gaul (roughly, today's France and the Lowlands). These areas had links to the Eastern church, which celebrated its Nativity feast on January 6, called Epiphany. They approached this feast with forty days of fasting and penance, very similar to Lent, possibly because Epiphany was seen as a time for baptism, as was the Easter Vigil at the end of Lent.

By the mid-6th century, the church in Rome had

begun to focus on days of penance that occurred on the Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday after the feast of St. Lucy (December 13). The reason lay in a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia, from December 17-23. On December 17, sacrifice was offered to Saturn, god of agriculture. The days following were filled with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. It seems that the church tried to offset the influence of this popular pagan festival with days of fasting, prayer, and penance as it looked ahead to the feast of Nativity on December 25.

There is also an ancient tradition of singing the O Antiphons during the Liturgy of Hours on precisely the same days as the pagan Saturnalia. The singing of these O Antiphons, always an Advent tradition, is still popular today, and they have become the Alleluia verses at Mass for December 17-23:

(*O Sapientia*) Come, Wisdom of our God...

(*O Adonai*) Come, Leader of Ancient Israel...

(*O Radix Jesse*) Come, Flower of Jesse's Stem...

(*O Clavis David*) Come, Key of David...

(*O Oriens*) Come, Radiant Dawn...

(*O Rex Gentium*) Come, King of all Nations...

(*O Emmanuel*) Come, Emmanuel...

Advent Traditions

Some religious traditions during the month of December are directly associated with the themes of