

Advent Traditions

During the hustle and bustle of the holidays, it's valuable to spend time in contemplation of the true reason for the season: celebrating the coming of Christ. Let's take a brief look at the history of Advent in the church and how cultures from around the world honor this festive time.

The observance of Advent marks a time for reflection, prayer, and preparation for the joyous celebration of Jesus' birth¹. The name Advent comes from the Latin word "adventus" meaning "coming"². The season generally begins the 4th Sunday before Christmas, and in the Catholic faith it starts the Sunday closest to November 30th which is the Feast of St Andrew. It may have originated as a time to ready new Christians for baptism ahead of Epiphany³. The earliest official celebrations of Advent are thought to have occurred in northern Italy beginning around the 5th century⁴. As Christianity has evolved through the ages, so too has its traditions.



The Advent wreath is a familiar sight in homes and churches for many Christians. Often decorated with evergreen foliage, an additional candle is lit on the wreath each Advent Sunday until Christmas Eve. Johann Hinrich Wichern, a Lutheran pastor in Germany, started this tradition back in 1839⁵. Winchern founded Rauhes Haus, an institution with the Protestant Inner Mission for poor boys in Hamburg⁶. To help the children tell time until Christmas, he created a "wreath" with a cartwheel, four white candles, and smaller red candles in

between⁷. Each day in Advent, the boys lit a new candle, with the white candles being lit on Sundays⁸. Over the years, these were eventually replaced with 3 purple candles for the first, second and fourth Sundays of Advent, a pink candle for the 3rd Sunday, and often a white candle in the center of the wreath to be lit on Christmas eve. Some denominations may utilize different color candles like red or blue, but this purple-pink arrangement is quite common⁹. The candles represent a spiritual theme for each Sunday: hope, peace, joy and love. Purple corresponds with traditional vestment colors for those Sundays in Advent and symbolizes penance. Pink represents joy, a short break in the penitent nature of Advent¹⁰. The central white candle, sometimes referred to as the "Christ Candle" represents the arrival of our Savior on Christmas.

The Advent wreath is just one example of a time-honored tradition, and across the world people celebrate the season in many other ways. Here are some examples of just a few:

The ceremony of Las Posadas originated in Spain but has been observed in Mexico for over 400 years¹¹. The name Las Posadas translates to “lodgings”. Commencing on December 16th and ending on Christmas Eve, Las Posadas is a 9-day tradition that celebrates the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem ¹². The 9-day length also represents the 9 months of Mary's pregnancy¹³. As night falls on the 16th, a candlelit procession of worshippers winds through the streets, children dressed as shepherds and angels ¹⁴. The group goes from house to house, singing, begging for shelter and being turned away ¹⁵. They are finally allowed entrance when they reach a designated home, and food is provided ¹⁶. Each night until Christmas Eve, the group takes to the streets and is welcomed into a different home ¹⁷. The practice represents Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay in Bethlehem.



Churches in the Philippines observe Simbang Gabi, nine days of early morning masses leading up to Christmas Eve. The tradition started back during the colonial period ¹⁸. Farmers began their long workdays early, so church services would be held before sunrise, beginning as early as 3 am ¹⁹. The customary star-shaped lantern called a “paròl” lights the dim streets ²⁰. While the clergy normally wear purple vestments during Advent, all white is traditional for Simbang Gabi

²¹. After the service, food and drinks are served before parishioners head to work ²².

A large number of Christian Ethiopians are part of the Orthodox Church and celebrate Christmas, or “Genna”, on January 7th ²³. Advent is a time of fasting; meat, fish, and dairy is removed from the diet ²⁴. The fast ends with a large meal of rich foods and meats.



Italian Catholics celebrate a few feasts during the period of Advent. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, “Immacolata” occurs in December 8th and remembers the Virgin Mary's holy conception ²⁵. December 13th marks the feast of Santa Lucia, patron saint of the blind. Her home city of Syracuse in Sicily honors her with meals, candlelight and a parade of her statues and relics ²⁶. Zampognari may be seen in Italian towns at this time of year as well ²⁷. In the past, these musicians were shepherds;

today they still dress in traditional shepherd's garb and walk the streets play the zampogna, an instrument like the bagpipes ²⁸.

At this time of year, folks in Britain engage in a unique celebration called Christingle. It is a candlelight service that often occurs during Advent but can happen anytime during the winter months ²⁹. The Christingle service is named after the symbolic object called a Christingle that is made for the ceremony. It consists of an orange wrapped in red ribbon or tape, decorated with dried fruits or candies and topped off with a candle ³⁰. The tradition originated back in 1747 with the Moravian Church in Germany ³¹. Bishop Johannes de Watteville desired a simple way to teach children about Jesus' love and thus the Christingle was born ³². The orange symbolizes the world, the red ribbon is the love and blood of Jesus, the fruits and candies are God's creations, and the candle represents Jesus' light ³³. Christingle services rose to popularity in Britain in the 1960s as charity fundraiser events and are enjoyed across the country ³⁴.





Like the cherished tradition of the Advent wreath, the Advent calendar was also invented in Germany. German Lutherans in the 1900s started off marking doors with chalk each day until Christmas ³⁵. To make this more entertaining, the first handmade wood Advent calendar was created in 1851 and in 1908, German printer Gerhard Lang manufactured the first printed Advent calendar ^{36,37}. The product was very well-received in Germany but almost disappeared in later years due to supply

shortages in World War II ³⁸. After the war, Advent calendars were introduced to the United States and became increasingly popular after a photo was released of President Eisenhower opening one with his grandkids in 1953 ³⁹. Although the Advent season generally starts in November, most Advent calendars begin on December 1st and go up to Christmas Eve. Germany is also famous for their beautiful Christmas markets, selling festive wares and treats. Oftentimes each market will have it's own nativity scene or "Krippe" for folks to admire while enjoying some Glühwein, a seasonal drink of hot wine ⁴⁰. December 6th marks St Nikolaus day, a bishop who inspired modern-day Santa Claus with his generous gift-giving. On the evening of December 5th, families will place their boots by the door and in the morning, Saint Nikolaus will have filled them with gifts and sweets ⁴¹.



Across the globe, the season of Advent and the coming of Jesus are celebrating in very different ways. Whatever way you observe, be mindful to keep Jesus' love and light in your heart and prayers!

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