

# What is Advent?

Advent is the liturgical season before Christmas, in which the Church prepares to celebrate Christ's birth. This article responds to some common questions about the origin, meaning, and customs of Advent.

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## Summary

1. At what time of year does Advent take place?

2. What is characteristic of this liturgical season?

3. What is the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Advent?

4. How is the season of Advent reflected in the Holy Mass?

5. How did this liturgical season begin?

6. Advent customs

"Advent is the time we are given to welcome the Lord who comes to encounter us, and also to verify our longing for God, to look forward and prepare ourselves for Christ's return. He will return to us in the celebration of Christmas, when we will remember his historic coming in the humility of the human condition; but he enters our heart each time we are willing to receive him; and he will come again at the end of time to

'judge the living and the dead'" (Pope Francis, Angelus December 3, 2017).

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## **1. At what time of the year does Advent take place?**

The season of Advent is the inauguration of the liturgical year, "in which the Church marks the passage of time with the celebration of the main events in Jesus' life and the story of salvation" (Pope Francis, Angelus November 29, 2020). It lasts four weeks, from the first vespers of the Sunday closest to November 30 until the first vespers of December 25. This period includes the four Sundays before Christmas. "During these four weeks we are called to leave behind a resigned and routine way of life and to go forth, nourishing hope, nourishing dreams

for a new future" (Pope Francis, Angelus, December 2, 2018).

The season is divided into two parts, each highlighting an important truth of faith. The first ends on December 16 and focuses on the second coming of the Messiah. The second, from December 17 to 24, is directed towards preparing more immediately for Christmas. In this way, the Church helps the faithful to remember and reflect on the One who "assumed at his first coming the lowliness of human flesh, and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago, and opened for us the way to eternal salvation, that, when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which now we dare to hope."<sup>[1]</sup> —

## Meditate with St. Josemaría

- The liturgical year is beginning, and the introit of the Mass invites us to consider something closely related to the beginning of our Christian life: the vocation we have all received. "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths." We ask the Lord to guide us, to show us his footprints, so we can set out to attain the fullness of his commandments, which is charity. (*Christ Is Passing By*, 1)
- We arrived. —It is the house where John the Baptist is to be born. —Elizabeth gratefully hails the Mother of her Redeemer: Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb! —How have I deserved to be thus visited by the Mother of my Lord? (Luke 1:42-43) The unborn Baptist quivers... (Luke

1:41) —Mary's humility pours forth in the Magnificat... —And you and I, who are proud — who were proud—, promise to be humble. (*Holy Rosary*, 2)

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## **2. What is characteristic of this liturgical season?**

The season of Advent is considered a "high point" in the liturgical year because it helps us prepare to receive the Lord in Christmas. At the same time, it directs us to increase our hope in the second coming of Christ, and reminds us of his continual presence in the Eucharist. "When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour's first coming, the faithful renew their

ardent desire for his second coming. By celebrating the precursor's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' (Jn 3:30)" <sup>[2]</sup> It is an invitation to conversion and hope.

The preparation that the Church proposes to us during Advent takes the form of a journey of personal conversion. The liturgy makes this path present to us through the figure of John the Baptist. From the hand of the precursor we begin a journey of detachment from sin and worldliness, "this conversion involves suffering for sins committed, the desire to be free from them, the intention to exclude them from one's own life forever" (Pope Francis, Angelus, December 6, 2020). Only in this way will we be able to direct ourselves to the search for God and his kingdom, to friendship and communion with God, which is the

true goal of the conversion of each one of us.

At the same time, it is a moment of confident hope in the Messiah. This hope is based on the fact that "the Lord always comes, He is always by our side. At times he does not make himself seen, but he always comes. He came at a precise moment in history and became man to take on our sins — the feast of the Nativity commemorates Jesus' first coming in the historical moment —; He will come at the end of times as universal judge" (Pope Francis, Angelus November 29, 2020).

During these days, the Church reminds us that God is present in human history and continues to act to lead it to its fullness in Jesus Christ. So we ask him, and the liturgy reminds us, "May these mysteries, O Lord, in which we have participated, profit us, we pray, for even now, as



we walk amid passing things, you teach us by them to love the things of heaven and hold fast to what endures."<sup>[3]</sup> —

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Fall in love with the Sacred Humanity of Jesus Christ. — Aren't you glad that he should have wanted to be like us? Thank Jesus for this wonderful expression of his goodness! (*The Forge*, 547)
- The virtue of hope assures us that God governs us with his all powerful providence and that he gives us all the means we need. Hope makes us aware of Our Lord's constant good will towards mankind, towards you and me. He is always ready to hear us, because he never tires of listening. He is interested in your joys, your successes, your love, and also in your worries,

your suffering and your failures. So do not hope in him only when you realise you are weak. Call upon your heavenly Father in good times and in bad, taking refuge in his merciful protection. And our conviction that we are nothing (it doesn't take a high degree of humility to recognise the truth that we are nothing but a row of zeros) will turn into irresistible strength, because Christ will be the one to the left of these zeros, converting them into an immeasurable figure! 'The Lord is my strength and my refuge; whom shall I fear?'

- Get used to seeing God behind everything, realising that he is always waiting for us, that he is contemplating us and quite rightly demands that we follow him faithfully without abandoning the place assigned to us in the world. In order not

to lose his divine company, we must walk with loving vigilance and with a sincere determination to struggle.

*(Friends of God, 218)*

- Jesus Our Lord loved men so much that he became incarnate, took to himself our nature, and lived in daily contact with the poor and the rich, with the just and with sinners, with young and old, with Gentiles and Jews. He spoke constantly to everyone: to those who showed good will towards him, and to those who were only looking for a way to twist his words and condemn him. —You should try to act as Our Lord did. (*The Forge*, 558)

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### **3. What is the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Advent?**

Throughout the year, the liturgy reminds us of the intercession of the Blessed Virgin on behalf of all the faithful, and the season of Advent is no exception. The Blessed Virgin shines on our path as “a sign of sure hope and comfort”<sup>[4]</sup> — to make Advent a true preparation for receiving the Child Jesus.

It is no coincidence that the commemoration of the Immaculate Conception, celebrated on December 8, falls during the second week of Advent. This feast reminds us that the Blessed Virgin is the image of what we are called to be: "holy and spotless" (Eph 1:4). Being conceived without original sin, Mary reflects the beauty of a life in grace, of union with God, free from sin. That beauty is an attraction that moves us to lead a clean life, detached from sin and open to grace. As Pope Francis expressed, "what was for Mary at the beginning, will be for us at the end"

(Pope Francis, Angelus December 8, 2020). In this way Our Lady assists her children in the Church to follow the path of conversion to which Advent invites them.

On the other hand, Our Lady is also an example of hope: a persevering trust in God that is poured out in service to others. At the Angel's announcement, Mary responds, "*Fiat!* Let it be done to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38), confidently accepting God's will: to be the mother of the Messiah for the redemption of all people. She then set out to help her relative Elizabeth who was in her sixth month of pregnancy (cf. Lk 1:39). Then, shortly before giving birth to the Child, she had to move from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and it can be inferred that she had prepared what was necessary to have everything ready when the time came (cf. Lk 2:1-7).

These are just a few scenes that delineate the hope of Holy Mary and that Advent invites us to imitate: an active hope. "So, we are in that 'sacred exchange' between God and man, between man and man, in which everything belongs to all in the 'communion of saints.' This Gospel calls us to enter the door of the fiat: that is its invitation, that is the hand of grace that the Lord extends to us in this hour of Advent."<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, devotion to the Blessed Virgin helps us to maintain an active hope, to say with her, "*Fiat!*"

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Because Mary is our mother, devotion to her teaches us to be authentic sons: to love truly, without limit; to be simple, without the complications which come from selfishly thinking only about ourselves;

to be happy, knowing that nothing can destroy our hope. "The beginning of the way, at the end of which you will find yourself completely carried away by love for Jesus, is a trusting love for Mary." I wrote that many years ago, in the introduction to a short book on the Rosary, and since then I have often experienced the truth of those words. I am not going to complete that thought here with all sorts of reasons. I invite you to discover it for yourself, showing your love for Mary, opening your heart to her, confiding to her your joys and sorrows, asking her to help you recognize and follow Jesus. (*Christ Is Passing By*, 143)

- In a very natural way we start wanting to speak to the Mother of God, who is also our mother. We want to treat her as someone who is alive. For death

has not triumphed over her; she is body and soul in the presence of God the Father, her Son, and the Holy Spirit.

- The Catholic faith sees Mary as a sign of God's special love. God calls us his friends; his grace acts in us, winning us from sin, enabling us to reflect in some way the features of Christ, even though we are still wretched dirt. We are not stranded people whom God has promised to save. His salvation is already at work in us. In our relationship to God, we are not blind men yearning for light and crying in anguished darkness. We are children who know our Father loves us.
- Mary tells us about this warmth and security. That's why her name goes straight to our heart. Our relationship with our own mother may show us how to deal with Mary the Lady of the



Sweet Name. (*Christ Is Passing By*, 142)

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#### **4. How is the season of Advent reflected in the Holy Mass?**

This time of preparation for the coming of the Messiah comes alive in the liturgy of the Holy Mass, as "the liturgy leads us to celebrate the Nativity of Jesus, while it reminds us that he comes into our lives every day, and will return gloriously at the end of time" (Pope Francis Angelus December 1, 2019). The readings of Advent lead us to witness the moments in the history of salvation in which the Lord revives the hope of those who believe in his coming and invites them to vigilance and penance. Thus, the liturgy underlines these ideas through the various texts of the prophets, of the apostles, and

of Jesus' own teaching in the Gospels. "Attentive meditation on the texts of the Advent liturgy helps us to prepare ourselves, so that his presence does not pass unnoticed" (Advent: Preparing for the Lord's Coming).

Considering the Gospel passages selected for this season, the first Sunday reflects on the coming of the Lord at the end of time, the second coming of the Messiah. In the Gospel reading, we find the passage where Jesus invites us to be vigilant, to be awake at all times, because we do not know when the Lord will come.<sup>[6, 7]</sup> The second and third Sundays present John the Baptist, who announces the coming of the Messiah and the need for conversion in order to receive him.<sup>[8]</sup> Thus, the Church invites the faithful to ask forgiveness for their sins and to live in the hope of knowing that they are accompanied by Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the fourth Sunday focuses on a more direct preparation for the Lord's first coming. For this, the liturgy proposes the Gospel readings on the events closest to Christmas. Among them are the joyful announcement of Jesus' birth by the Angel to St. Mary and St. Joseph.<sup>[9]</sup> In this way, the Church urges her faithful to experience the joy of the encounter with the Child Jesus. "It is precisely this encounter between God and his children, thanks to Jesus, that gives life to our religion and constitutes its singular beauty (Pope Francis, "On the meaning and importance of the Nativity scene").

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- Advent is here: what a good time to renew our desire, our longing, our sincere yearning for Christ's coming, for his daily coming to your soul in the

Eucharist! - "Ecce veniet!" -  
"Ecce veniet!", the Church  
encourages us. (*The Forge*, 548)

- If you leaf through the holy  
Scripture, you will discover  
constant references to the  
mercy of God. Mercy fills the  
earth. It extends to all his  
children, and is "all around us."  
It "watches over me." It  
"extends to the heavens" to help  
us, and has been continually  
"confirmed." God, in taking care  
of us as a loving father, looks on  
us in his mercy — a mercy that  
is "tender," welcome as "rain-  
clouds." The life of Jesus Christ  
is a summary and compendium  
of the story of divine mercy:  
"Blessed are the merciful, for  
they shall obtain mercy." And  
on another occasion our Lord  
said: "Be merciful, therefore,  
even as your Father is  
merciful." (*Christ Is Passing By*,  
7)

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## **5. How did this liturgical season begin?**

The Church began to live Advent in the fourth century as a period distinct from the rest of the liturgical year. It began in Hispania (ancient Spain) and Gaul (ancient France) as an ascetical and penitential preparation for the feast days of Christmas.

Since the Council of Saragossa (Spain) in the year 380, it was established that the faithful should attend daily the ecclesiastical celebrations from December 17 to January 6. The general mood proper to this time was asceticism, prayer and frequent gatherings. These practices varied according to the different churches of Gaul, Milan, Hispania and England until, in the 6th century, a period of Advent

lasting six weeks was introduced into the Roman liturgy. This was later reduced to four weeks by Pope St. Gregory the Great.

Roman Advent acquired greater significance over time so that, in addition to being a preparation for our Lord's birth, it is also a time of joyful hope for his return at the end of time.<sup>[10]</sup>

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## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- We have to cast out all the worries that separate us from him; And then Christ will be in your mind, on your lips, in your heart, stamped on your deeds. All of your life will be full of God — in its sentiments, its works, its thoughts and its words. "Look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand," we have just read in the Gospel. This time of Advent is a time for

hope. These great horizons of our Christian vocation, this unity of life built on the presence of God our Father, can and ought to be a daily reality. (*Christ Is Passing By*, 11)

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## **6. Advent customs**

Popular piety manifests itself in different ways in each culture. As soon as Advent begins, the faithful put into practice various customs that help them prepare to meditate on the mysteries of this liturgical season.

One custom that is widespread is the Advent wreath. It consists of pine branches in the shape of a wreath with four candles, three purple and one pink, which are lit every Sunday of Advent. The purple ones represent the spirit of penance, conversion and

vigilance that is encouraged during this liturgical season in preparation for the coming of Christ. The pink one is reserved for the third Sunday of Advent and represents the joy at the approaching birth of the Lord. In churches, the wreath is lit during the celebration of the Holy Mass. In homes, they are lit with the whole family, often with prayers or songs related to Advent.

Another way to prepare for the birth of the Lord is to put up a nativity scene. Christian families preserve the tradition of representing in their homes the mystery of the nativity of Jesus through figures. "The nativity scene is like a living Gospel rising up from the pages of Sacred Scripture. As we contemplate the Christmas story, we are invited to set out on a spiritual journey, drawn by the humility of the God who became man in order to encounter every man and woman" (Pope Francis,



Apostolic Letter *Admirabile Signum*). In front of these scenes, families gather to pray and sing carols and it becomes the setting for other acts of piety.

Other traditions prepare the last days of Advent with various Novenas, such as the Posadas in Mexico, the "Aguinaldo" Masses in Puerto Rico and in the Philippines, the Novena to the Divine Child in Ecuador and Colombia, and so many other practices in different cultures. The faithful of the Church are always eager to welcome the Child Jesus as well as possible.

"In short, Advent is a time of preparation and an impulse for the encounter with Christ. Our journey towards Bethlehem has to be a search for Jesus in all the dimensions of our ordinary life. But to achieve this we have to 'make his paths straight.' What does it mean to 'make

his paths straight'? It means, for us, removing obstacles to our Lord's coming to us, to our souls, and to our lives" (Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, December 7, 2020).

## **Meditate with St. Josemaría**

- "What security should be ours in considering the mercy of the Lord! "He has but to cry for redress, and I, the ever merciful, will listen to him." It is an invitation, a promise that he will not fail to fulfill. "Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need." The enemies of our sanctification will be rendered powerless if the mercy of God goes before us. And if through our own fault and human weakness we should fall, the Lord comes to

our aid and raises us up. "You had learned to avoid negligence, to flee from arrogance, to grow in piety, not to be a prisoner of worldly matters, to prefer the eternal to the passing. But since human weakness cannot maintain a steady pace in such a slippery world, the good doctor has prescribed remedies for not getting lost and the merciful judge has not led you to despair of pardon." (*Christ Is Passing By*, 7)

- And in Bethlehem is born our God: Jesus Christ! —There is no room at the inn: He is born in a stable. —And His Mother wraps Him in swaddling clothes and lays Him in a manger.
- Cold. —Poverty... —I am Joseph's little servant. —How good Joseph is! —He treats me like a father. —He even forgives me if I take the Child in my

arms and spend hour after hour saying sweet and loving things to Him!...

- And I kiss Him —you kiss Him too! —and I rock Him in my arms, and I sing to Him, and I call Him King, Love, my God, my Only-one, my All!... How beautiful is the Child and how short the decade! (*Holy Rosary*, 3)

<sup>[1]</sup> Roman Missal, Preface I of Advent.

<sup>[2]</sup> CCC, no. 524.

<sup>[3]</sup> Roman Missal, First Sunday of Advent, Prayer after Communion.

<sup>[4]</sup> Roman Missal, Preface IV of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

<sup>[5]</sup> Joseph Ratzinger. (2007). *The Blessing of Christmas*. Herder.

<sup>[6]</sup> cf. Ordination of the Readings of the Mass, no. 93.

<sup>[7]</sup> cf. Mk 13:33-37; Mt 24:37-44; Lk 21:25-36.

<sup>[8]</sup> cf. Mk 1:1-8; Mt 3:1-12; Lk 3:1-18; Jn 1:19-28.

<sup>[9]</sup> cf. Mt 1:18-24; Lk 1:26-38.

<sup>[10]</sup> cf. Abad Ibañez, J.A. (1996). La celebración del Misterio Cristiano. Eunsa.

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