

Question 285

What is an advent wreath? What is a Jesse tree?

Advent wreaths and Jesse trees belong to beautiful customs that have grown outside the Liturgy, but certainly add a flavor to the season.

Historically, the Advent wreath is a Lutheran custom dating back three hundred years ago. However, the custom of using wreaths and greenery dates back to Roman times. During December, the ancient Romans would decorate their homes with greenery for the Feast of the Sun God on December 25. It was a celebration of the return of the sun to the northern hemisphere. Greenery reminded the Romans of vegetation and springtime. Advent wreaths now even adorn our churches for the four weeks of Advent.

Christians, when choosing a day to celebrate the Lord's birth, chose December 25 so that they would not stick out in their society. Remember, they were being persecuted, and Christianity was an underground religion. Christians took the good from other religions and "Christianized" it. The Feast of the Sun God became the Feast of the Son of God and His birthday. Romans celebrated the return of the sun; Christians celebrated Christ who is the Light of the World. Greenery for Christians became a symbol of hope and eternity.

Advent wreaths are made of evergreens and have four candles fastened to them. The colors correspond to the colors of Advent: purple for the first two weeks, rose for the third week (Gaudete Sunday), and then purple for the final week. At home, the candles are usually lit at the evening meal when darkness is all around. The candle represents Christ who is the Light of the World. The wreath itself is an ancient Roman symbol of victory, so the Advent wreath symbolizes the ultimate victory of the Coming of the Lord.

Advent calendars, which originated in Germany, are also used during the season. Colorful scenes are painted on the outside of the calendar with little doors corresponding to the days of Advent. Each day a door is opened revealing a picture, a biblical saying, or even a little chocolate. The sayings or symbols point to the Feast of Christmas. It is customary for little children to perform a good work before they can open the door and receive their little gift.

The Jesse tree is a genealogical tree often displayed in Advent that traces the ancestry of Jesus beginning with Jesse, father of King David. It is usually located in the vestibule of the Church.

- From "The Catholicism Answer Book - The 300 Most Frequently Asked Questions"