

## THE SEASON OF ADVENT

*In the Gospel... John the Baptist's invitation resounds: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Mt 3:2). With these very words, Jesus begins his mission in Galilee (cf. Mt 4:17); and such will also be the message that the disciples must bring on their first missionary experience (cf. Mt 10:7). Matthew the evangelist would like to present John as the one who prepares the way of the coming Christ, as well as the disciples as followers, as Jesus preached. It is a matter of the same joyful message: the kingdom of God is at hand! It is near, and it is in us! These words are very important: "The kingdom of God is in our midst!", Jesus says. And John announces what Jesus will say later: "The kingdom of God is at hand, it has arrived, and is in your midst".*

*This is the central message of every Christian mission..*

*(Pope Francis, Sunday Angelus, Second Sunday of Advent 2016)*

Beginning the Church's liturgical year, Advent (from, "ad-venire" in Latin or "to come to") is the season encompassing the four Sundays (and weekdays) leading up to the celebration of Christmas.

The Advent season is a time of preparation that directs our hearts and minds to Christ's second coming at the end of time and also to the anniversary of the Lord's birth on Christmas. The final days of Advent, from December 17 to December 24, focus particularly on our preparation for the celebrations of the Nativity of our Lord (Christmas). In addition, the Church teaches that "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 John the Baptist's birth and martyrdom, the Church unites herself to his desire: 'He must increase, but I must decrease'." (CCC 524)

## THE GREAT 'O' ANTIPHONS OF ADVENT

The *Great O Antiphons* are seven brief prayers that are traditionally sung on successive evenings starting on 17 December. These ancient supplications beautifully express the Christian Church's profound yearning for her long expected Saviour. The *O Antiphons* form the basis of the popular Advent hymn, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, by the English hymn writer John Neale.

The *Great O Antiphons* are rich in meaning and nuance. Each antiphon begins with the acclamation 'O', addresses Christ by one of his messianic titles from the Old Testament, and ends with a heartfelt plea for his coming. The sequence of antiphons is theologically precise, progressing from before the creation of the universe, through the messianic prophecies of Israel, and culminating with the Incarnation and birth of Christ in Bethlehem. The initials of each Latin title – *Sapientia, Adonai, Radix, Clavis, Oriens, Rex, and Emmanuel* – combine to form SARCORE. When this is arranged backwards it spells the phrase *ERO CRAS*, which means 'Tomorrow I shall come.' Christians since the Middle Ages have been fascinated by this coincidence because Christmas Eve (24 December) falls on the day after singing the final antiphon.

## **Liturgical Music and the Liturgical Environment**

'During Advent, the playing of the organ and other musical instruments as well as the floral decoration of the altar should be marked by a moderation that reflects the character of this season, without anticipating the full joy of the Nativity of the Lord itself' (CB 236).

The Gloria is not sung on Sundays in Advent. This is not as a sign of repentance, but to create a longing that will inspire people to sing this 'Song of the Angels' more joyfully at Christmas. It is important to maintain the integrity of the season of Advent. So often we pre-empt the Christmas season by allowing Christmas carols to encroach upon our sense of expectancy and waiting. Anticipation tends to take precedence over prolongation. Advent is the gateway not to Christmas but to Christmastide (concluding with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord).

**The parish might seriously consider setting aside Christmas Carols during Advent (where civic and school demands permit) in favour of a late Service of Advent Carols, saving our great Christmas Carols for the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord.**

## **The Advent Wreath**

The Advent wreath, with the progressive lighting of its four candles, Sunday after Sunday, until the Solemnity of Christmas, is a recollection of the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ's coming and a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf. Mal 3, 20; Lk 1, 78) The blessing of an Advent wreath takes place on the First Sunday of Advent or on the evening before the First Sunday of Advent.

Customarily the Advent Wreath is constructed of a circle of evergreen branches into which are inserted four candles. According to tradition, three of the candles are violet and the fourth is rose. However, four violet or white candles may also be used (Book of Blessings 1510). The rose candle is lit on the third Sunday of Advent, for this colour anticipates and symbolises the Christmas joy announced in the first word of the Entrance Antiphon: "Rejoice" (Gaudete).