

ADVENT-CHRISTMAS

THE ORIGINS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS

The present pattern of a four week Advent season followed by a Christmas season spanning the feasts of Jesus' birth and baptism disguises a long and complex history. In spite of intensive efforts by liturgical scholars a definitive account of the origins of the Advent season and the feasts of Christmas and the Epiphany has proved elusive.

ADVENT



The season of Advent is peculiar to the Western church. It has no counterpart in the East. Outside of Rome it may have arisen as a three or six week period of preparation for baptism on the feast of the Epiphany. Administering baptism on this day would have appealed at a time when the baptism of Jesus was the primary "epiphany" being celebrated (along with other revelations of Jesus' identity such as the visit of the Magi, the wedding feast at Cana and the transfiguration).

When the birth of Christ came to be observed in Rome on 25th December in the fourth century, Christmas was taken to be the beginning of the year. Thus Advent, once it took shape, served as the conclusion of the year. It was characterised by an emphasis on Christ's coming in glory at the end of time rather than on preparation for his nativity. Certainly in the time of Gregory the Great (590-604) Advent was eschatological rather than incarnational. It was Gregory who shortened the season from six weeks to four.

Eventually a four week season became universal in the Western church that combined three themes: spiritual discipline (arising from preparation for baptism or from Ember Days), preparation for Christmas (originating in places such as North Italy before being adopted in Rome), and the last times. It was only in the 10th century with the merger of Roman and Frankish liturgical traditions that Advent came to be understood as the beginning of the church's year. By the time liturgical books came to be standardised in the 12th and 13th centuries a four week Advent season focussed on John the Baptist and on the parousia was established as the norm.

CHRISTMAS

The emergence of the Western feasts of Christmas and the Epiphany continues to be a matter of lively debate among scholars. What is agreed is that the story begins in the East with the feast of the Epiphany.

Epiphany in the East

By around the year 300 a liturgical celebration of Jesus' birth and baptism, with vigil, was being celebrated on 6th January in Egypt. The primary focus of the feast was Jesus' baptism rather than his birth, probably because the Gospels' invocation of Psalm 2:7 in their accounts of the baptism suggest that he was "born" as God's Son in that event. Several other epiphanies or revelations of Jesus' identity, such as the visit of the Magi, the sign at Cana, the transfiguration, and the multiplication of

the loaves and fishes, became associated with the feast. In sum, the eastern feast of Epiphany was multi-faceted and rich in meaning.

There are two competing theories about the date of the feast. One is that it was chosen to replace a pagan festival celebrated on that day in Egypt, the other that it was determined by calendar calculations to relate to the observance of the pasch in April. The matter remains unresolved.

Epiphany in the West

The first witness to a Western feast of the Epiphany is in Gaul in 361. When it eventually became established in Rome, for reasons that are unclear its central focus was the visit of the Magi, though reference to Jesus' baptism and the feast of Cana persisted.

It is worth noting that it was only in 1960 that the baptism of Jesus became an independent feast in the Roman calendar. At first it was observed on the octave day of the Epiphany, and then moved in 1969 to the Sunday after the Epiphany.

Christmas in the West

The first Western reference to 25th December as the birthday of Christ is in a Roman document called the *Chronograph of 354* (but perhaps based on an earlier source). This places the document between the Council of Nicaea in 325 and that of Constantinople in 381, both of which condemned the Arian heresy which denied the divinity of Christ.

As with the Epiphany there are two theories as to how this date was chosen.

The first argues that it was selected in opposition to the festival of the Invincible Sun instituted by Emperor Aurelian in 274. The second claims that in the ancient world it was believed that great persons were conceived on the same day they died. On this basis, if Jesus died on 25th March, then he was conceived on that day and born on 25th December. Scholars remain divided on the merits of each theory.

Just how and when the feast of Christmas came to be celebrated elsewhere in the Western church is also a matter of scholarly dispute.

Although some of the exact origin of these feasts remain shrouded in the mists of time, the important fact is that they have been celebrated faithfully and have nourished the life of God's people continually for over 1500 years.

PASTORAL NOTES

The following pastoral notes on the liturgies of Advent and Christmas are offered in order to assist parishes celebrate them well. They do not, in fact cannot, cover every detail. Local communities and liturgical teams must take their particular circumstances into account and make their own choice of the various options available. However the combination of history, general principles and select details presented here can serve as a helpful catalyst in the process of preparing these important celebrations.

The notes assume that the parish has a functioning liturgical planning team equipped with the personnel, knowledge, experience and skills needed for the preparation of worthy liturgical celebrations. A further and indispensable task for the team is the evaluation of the liturgies once they have been celebrated. The purpose of this is wholly positive. The key questions to be asked are: what worked well? what could be done better next time? The aim of the exercise is to enhance

the worthy celebration of the mysteries of faith for the sake of the whole worshipping community. It should be completed while the experience is still fresh in people's minds.

It must be noted that one major dimension of the liturgy – music – is referred to only in passing. This is a reflection of its importance, not the opposite. The proper treatment it deserves is beyond the scope of this resource. The same goes for the Scripture readings and prayers. Commentaries on these, especially the readings, are readily available elsewhere.

Primary resources

- The Roman Missal
- Lectionary for Mass
- Book of Blessings

Official resources

- Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar
- *Catholic Worship Book II* (Melbourne: Morning Star Publications, 2016)

Books and articles

- Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson *The Origins of Feast, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Alcuin Club Collections 86; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011)
- Frank Senn *Introduction to Christian Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012)
- "Advent/Christmas/Epiphany" *Liturgical Ministry* Vol. 16 Spring 2007
- "Epiphany" *Liturgy* (Vol. 14, No. 2, Summer 1997)
- Articles in Peter Fink (ed.) *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1990)

General resources

- G. Thomas Ryan *The Sacristy Manual* 2nd ed. (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2011)
- Rita Thiron *Preparing Parish Liturgies: A Guide to Resources* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004)

Contemporary Advent

Context

No season of the year is more at odds with the prevailing culture in Australia than Advent. The advertising blitz for the Christmas shopping binge, reinforced by Christmas decor in shops, stores and streets, starts several weeks prior to Advent. To make matters worse, all this commercial Christmas decoration disappears on Christmas night to make way for the Boxing Day sales.

It's a busy time of the year. Schools and colleges are marking the end of the school year with exams, graduation ceremonies and farewells. Businesses are holding end-of-the year parties. Time and energy go into sending Christmas greetings of one kind or another. Families are occupied with plans for Christmas Day meals and summer holidays. There's a spirit of indulgence in the air, congruent with the languor of summer days.

Advent: the twofold coming of Christ

By contrast, this is what the Church says about Advent. "Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnity of Christmas, in which the First Coming of the Son of God to

humanity is remembered, and likewise a time when, by remembrance of this, minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ's Second Coming at the end of time. For these two reasons, Advent is a period of devout and expectant delight." (UNLYGRC #39, 1969)

The liturgy of Advent

The season begins with First Vespers of the Sunday on or nearest to 30th November and ends before the First Vespers of Christmas (ie on Christmas Eve). Depending on the day of the week that Christmas falls, Advent can be as short as three weeks and one day or as long as full four weeks, but there are always four Sundays.

The Sunday pattern

Two independent yet inter-related patterns, the Sunday and the weekday, are in play. The Sunday pattern centres on the Gospel reading. On the 1st Sunday the Gospel heralds the end times. On the 2nd and 3rd it highlights the mission of John the Baptist, while on the 4th it turns attention to the forthcoming Nativity of Christ. The Old Testament readings consist of messianic prophecies, mostly from Isaiah, while the second readings are season-related extracts from the writings of the apostles.

The weekday pattern

The weekdays of Advent are divided into two unequal sections. Working backwards, the second section consists of the final eight days leading up to Christmas, ie 17th-24th December. These days have their own combination of readings and prayers, including a Preface for the Eucharistic Prayer that invites prayerful preparation for the Nativity in company with Mary and the Baptist. The readings come from the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, with relevant Old Testament texts, especially the messianic prophecies. During this time the church prays a set of special antiphons dating from the 7th century (known as the "O" antiphons from their first word) for the Magnificat at Evening Prayer. In sum, these eight days serve to prepare more explicitly for the birth of Jesus.

The first section of Advent weekdays is itself divided into two parts. Up until the Thursday of the second week, the first readings are taken in a sequence from the prophet Isaiah and the Gospels (by way of exception) chosen to complement them. Together they offer a powerful word of reassurance and comfort. The Isaian texts are full of the promise of salvation, peace, joy and forgiveness; the Gospel texts recount Jesus' encouraging teachings and his ministry of healing and mercy.

From that Thursday until 17th December, the Gospels focus on the figure of John the Baptist, with the first reading either related to the Gospel or taken from Isaiah.

Advent prefaces

There are two prefaces specific to the Advent season. The first is for use up until the 16th December (feast days aside); it links the two comings of Christ – his incarnation and his return in glory – to evoke joyful confidence in God's saving design. The second is used from 17th December for the remainder of the season. With its more explicit reference to the approaching Nativity and especially to Mary and John the Baptist, it invites watchful prayer and exultant praise.

Always falling in the first part of Advent is the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It has its own full range of proper texts, including a preface. This celebration inserts a Marian moment in the eschatological phase of the season, anticipating the sustained focus on Mary in the second and incarnational phase.

The spirit of Advent

The spirit of Advent is one of hope, patient expectation, joy and contemplation. Its successive emphases on the coming of Christ – first his parousia and then his incarnation – are held together by the constant coming of Christ in word and sacrament. It is in the eucharistic celebrations of Advent that that Christ is experienced as “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13).

Although Advent is not a penitential season, the angelic hymn – the *Gloria* – is omitted, as in Lent, thus giving dramatic impact to its reappearance on Christmas Eve. The pre-Vatican II observance of Ember Days – days of supplication and fasting associated with the beginning of spring, summer, autumn and winter – may still continue under norms established by Conferences of Bishops (UNLYGRC ##45-47).

From both a secular and a liturgical point of view Advent is also a suitable time for the sacrament of reconciliation. The looming end of the calendar year and the season’s focus on the two comings of Christ combine to invite believers to take stock of their relationships – with God, self, others and creation.

Liturgical features

Silence

Silence is a much ignored and under-rated element of liturgical prayer. The Advent season is a most suitable time to take full advantage of the several explicit references to silent prayer in the Roman Missal, such as after each reading and after Communion (*GIRM* #56). Some brief catechesis may be of value to enable the faithful to make good use of these opportunities for prayer.

Liturgical colour

Violet is the colour of the Advent season. A lighter shade could be chosen for vestments to distinguish the hopeful spirit of Advent from the penitential character of Lent. Rose is an approved colour for the third Sunday.

Mindful that the figure of Mary is evoked both on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and through the last week of Advent, a seasonal colour that hints at the traditional blue associated with Mary could be appropriate.

Environment

The liturgical setting should be one of simplicity and restraint to reinforce the season’s spirit of prayerful vigilance (*GIRM* #305). This will be in stark contrast to the Christmas decorations that have adorned stores and streets and offices for several weeks.

Attention could be drawn to stained glass windows, icons or statues that feature Mary or John the Baptist.

Advent wreath

The custom of displaying and lighting the candles of an Advent wreath has become widespread. The practice may stem from pagan rites for the winter solstice which found their way into 17th century domestic devotions in Germany and then into the liturgy during the 20th century. Though there is no mention of it in the Roman Missal, the Book of Blessings (1989) contains an Order for the Blessing of an Advent Wreath, within either Mass (#1517-20) or a Celebration of the Word (#1521-33).

Traditionally the wreath is shaped into a circle of evergreen branches that house four candles, one for each week of the season, three being violet and one rose. The use of Australian native flora is to be commended. It should be of sufficient size to be visible to the whole assembly and may be either hung from the ceiling or placed on a stand, but without obscuring the altar, lectern or chair (#1512).

The blessing takes place only on the 1st Sunday of Advent; on the remaining Sundays the candles are lit either before Mass begins or before the opening collect, without additional rites or prayers (#1513).

Music

Like the worship space, the music of the Advent season is meant to be simple and restrained (cf. *GIRM* #313), apart from festive occasions such as the Immaculate Conception. In order to respect the particular character of each season, it is best to choose appropriate Advent hymnody rather than Christmas carols.

Liturgy of the Hours

Given the prayerful character of the season, Advent is a most suitable time to celebrate a simple communal form of Morning or Evening Prayer. In particular, Evening Prayer during the last eight days before Christmas, with its special “O” antiphons for the *Magnificat*, helps the community to prepare well for the feast of the Nativity. The ready availability of various editions of the Prayer of the Church makes this quite feasible.

Devotions

Jesse tree

While the custom has not become popular in Australia, setting up a Jesse tree can serve a good catechetical and spiritual purpose. As the days and weeks of Advent go by, the names or symbols of Jesus’ ancestors and of key figures from the Old Testament can be added to heighten the community’s sense of expectation. As the Jesse tree is not a liturgical item, it does not belong in the main arena of liturgical action, but in the porch or a side chapel.

Carol service

While carols have been played over and over in stores long before Christmas, their proper home is in the Christmas season. The pastoral opportunity offered by a parish or local carol service before Christmas should not be ignored, but every effort should be made to choose songs that are Advent in spirit and do not unduly anticipate the feast that is to come. They are best chosen to complement the Scripture readings and prayers that form the substance of the service.

Christmas crib

The custom of erecting a Christmas crib has its origins in the nativity plays of the 12th and 13th century, but it was the incarnational imagination of Francis of Assisi that established the crib’s popularity. Like the Advent wreath, the crib is not mentioned in the Roman Missal but is referred to in the Book of Blessings. Two Orders of Blessing for a Christmas manger or nativity scene are included, one within the celebration of the word of God (#1547-61), the other within Mass (#1562-69).

The directions are few: the blessing may take place on the Vigil of Christmas or at another pastorally suitable time (#1542); if the crib is located inside the church, it should be in a place that is accessible and suitable for prayer and devotion but not in the sanctuary (#1544); and the blessing may be given

by a priest, deacon or lay minister (#1546). Nothing is said about the placing of the image of the infant Jesus, but this ought not be done until the Vigil.

Christmas tree

The Book of Blessings also contains an Order of Blessing for a Christmas tree. The introduction states that if a tree is to be set up in church this should take place only just before Christmas. Care needs to be taken to ensure it is decorated in a church-appropriate way and does not interfere with the liturgical action (#1571). It may be blessed on or before Christmas during a celebration of the word of God or the Prayer of the Church (#1572).

CHRISTMAS: THE SEASON AND ITS FESTIVALS

Contemporary Christmas



The Christmas season in its contemporary form features a wealth of celebrations and observances unparalleled in the church's year of worship. It is also a season of great complexity and variability.

Much of this, unfortunately, fails to register even with regular worshippers because the traditional three-week summer holiday period always encompasses the Christmas season. Many people are either away on holidays or in recreational mode or watching sporting events. This "post-Christmas" mind-set is reinforced by the abrupt commercial shift away from Christmas shopping (prior to Christmas Day) to the advertising blitz for the sales of Boxing Day and beyond, as well as by the celebration of New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

The season of Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and concludes with the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. The major festivals within this period are:

- the Nativity of the Lord (25th December)
- the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
- Mary, the Holy Mother of God (1st January)
- the Epiphany of the Lord, and
- the Baptism of the Lord.

In addition the Nativity of the Lord is followed by an Octave that includes the feasts of:

- St Stephen, the First Martyr (26th December)
- St John, Apostle and Evangelist (27th December), and
- the Holy Innocents, Martyrs (28th December).

The dates for the celebration of the Holy Family, the Epiphany and the Baptism vary from year to year as follows:

- the Holy Family
 - Sunday within the Octave of the Nativity or, if no Sunday, 30th December
- the Epiphany
 - on the nearest Sunday between 2nd and 8th January

- the Baptism of the Lord
 - the Sunday after 6th January, but if the Epiphany occurs on 7th or 8th January 7, the following Monday.

Depending on the fall of dates, a Second Sunday after the Nativity may be celebrated between 2nd and 5th January.

Liturgical features

Liturgical colour

The liturgical colour for the season is white, but red vestments are worn for the martyrs Stephen and the Holy Innocents.

Prayers and readings for Nativity

The Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord is unique in having four sets of prayers in the Roman Missal and four corresponding sets of readings in the Lectionary for Mass. These are allocated to:

- the Vigil Mass
- the Mass during the Night
- the Mass at Dawn, and
- the Mass during the Day.

Each of the four first readings comes from the prophet Isaiah. All in their own way celebrate the dawn of a new era, for the salvation of all the peoples of the earth has been made manifest.

The second readings are varied. The first, from the Acts of the Apostles, is an excerpt from Paul's preaching that proclaims Jesus as the son of David. The next, from the letter to Titus, announces the revelation of God's grace in Jesus. The third, also from Titus, highlights the saving role of baptism, while the fourth comprises the majestic opening passage of the letter to the Hebrews which asserts the unique identity of Jesus as God's Son.

Each of the Gospel texts is distinct. The first is Matthew's account of the nativity (preceded by Jesus' genealogy), the second gives Luke's account of the nativity, the third is Luke's description of the adoration of the shepherds, and the fourth is the splendid prologue of John's Gospel.

It is worth noting that while the proclamation of Matthew's genealogy and John's prologue may present a pastoral challenge, given the unusual nature of Christmas Mass congregations, this is the only time that Sunday Mass-goers will ever hear these extraordinary texts.

Readings for the season

The major festivals of the season – the Holy Family, Mary, the Mother of God, the Epiphany and the Baptism of Jesus – all have combinations of readings selected to shed light on the specific mystery being celebrated.

Apart from the feast of St Stephen, the first reading for the weekdays of the season comes in ordered sequence from the first letter of John. The Gospel texts for the feasts of Stephen, John and the Holy Innocents are proper to each observance. Those for the remaining weekdays fall into three categories: events in Jesus' childhood (29-30th December), extracts from the prologue of John (31st December-5th January), and later manifestations of Jesus' identity and mission (7-12th January).

Prefaces

There are three Prefaces for use during the Christmas season. The first focusses on Christ the Light, the second on the restoration of all things in the Incarnation, and the third on the exchange in the Incarnation of the Word. Any one of these may be chosen throughout this time, except on the feasts of the Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord, each of which has its own preface, and on the feast of Mary, Mother of God, when the first preface for the Blessed Virgin Mary is specified.

Music

Music for the season – acclamations, Mass settings, hymns and instrumental music – should be appropriately festive, though the customary call of the holiday season may well mean that musicians and singers are in short supply. It may be a challenge, but singing the angelic hymn “Glory to God” should be a happy feature of the Sunday eucharist throughout the season.

The customary three-fold judgement for the choice of music remains in place: does each piece satisfy the proper liturgical, musical and pastoral criteria? This applies particularly to carols during the Mass. Are they appropriate for the liturgical action? Are they of sufficient musical quality? Will they engage the assembly readily in song, given that some of them may have been constantly in commercial play for months before Christmas?

Many parishes have carol singing on Christmas Eve, especially in the lead-up to family Masses. This can engage the assembly in the spirit of the night and prepare them for participation in the liturgy itself.

Environment

The liturgical setting for the Christmas season and its feasts should evoke a spirit of festive joy. While the prevailing colour of the season is white, arrangements of flowers could boldly incorporate its secondary colour, red. Enough needs to be done to celebrate the season visually, provided it complements and does not overwhelm the primary symbols of the liturgy or distract from the action of the celebration.

Christmas candle

Some parishes may have the custom of replacing with four candles of the Advent wreath with a single white candle to mark the birth of Christ. This should be of modest size to ensure that it is not confused with the paschal candle and its unique significance. In any case, if the wreath is so modified, it should still be removed by the end of Christmas Day.

Christmas tree

It may also be the custom in some parishes to install a Christmas tree in the liturgical space. If this is to forge a fruitful link between the secular and the spiritual celebration of Christmas, it should be decorated simply and appropriately and placed where it does not divert from or interfere with the liturgical action.

Pastoral issues

The liturgical celebration of Christmas offers valuable pastoral opportunities even as it presents particular challenges. The special character of Christmas attracts large numbers of people who wish to attend Mass, especially as families. This means an unusually high proportion of both young children and of people who are not regular Mass-goers.

Eliciting participation

Along with the logistical issues of when to schedule Masses on Christmas Eve and how to accommodate larger crowds, especially if the weather is hot and humid, the pressing question is how to elicit the full, conscious and active participation of the assembly.

Christmas pageant

Given the popularity of Christmas Eve Masses for families with young children, some parishes seek to involve children, and thereby engage the attention of their parents and the congregation, in a pageant or dramatization of Luke's nativity narrative. While this may have immediate appeal, pastors need to be aware of its less helpful implications. It may well reinforce a naively literal understanding of what is in fact a highly symbolic Gospel account. It may also insinuate the notion that the eucharistic celebration as a whole is a theatrical performance rather than a liturgical memorial. Two factors can alleviate these risks: a) keeping the pageant within modest limits, and b) a well-crafted homily that marries contemporary scholarship with good communication skills.

Full participation: a shared task

All liturgical ministers have a key role to play in fostering the assembly's participation:

- musicians and singers need to choose the music and rehearse well in advance; this preparation extends to ensuring that the whole congregation has access to the words of all items that are to be sung, whether in hard copy or via screens; it also means that all the equipment for sound amplification is in working order and is ready to be placed in the pre-determined locations
- readers need to be identified in time for them to prepare the text they are to proclaim; special rehearsals should be arranged so they can practise how to communicate God's word in the unusual circumstances of Christmas; they will need to gain the congregation's attention, speak more deliberately and with greater volume, and make proper use of pauses; they must appreciate how important a pastoral opportunity this is
- every effort should be made to offer Holy Communion under both kinds, even if this may seem very difficult to achieve; it will require careful planning to ensure there is enough bread and wine to be consecrated, to work out where and how Communion is to be distributed, and to secure and train sufficient ministers
- ministers of hospitality can play a vital role in welcoming people, especially strangers and visitors, and finding a place for them
- presiders, as always, have a unique role in orchestrating the whole celebration and facilitating the prayer of the whole assembly; they will serve their people well if they lead with warmth and grace and if they can communicate God's word succinctly and effectively.

A FINAL WORD

One of the rare treasures of the Advent-Christmas season is the Gospel for Mass on Christmas Day itself. As noted above, the majestic opening chapter of the Gospel of John is never heard on any Sunday or other feastday throughout the year (unless by way of exception when there happens to be a Second Sunday after the Nativity). The last words of the prologue are as beautiful as they are profound:

Indeed, from his fullness
we have all received,
grace upon grace,
for the Law was given through Moses,

grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God;
it is the only-begotten Son,
who is close to the father's heart
who has made him known.

John 1:17-18 (Revised New Jerusalem Bible)