

The Advent Wreath

For many households, the Advent Wreath has become an important part of the Advent season and has helped mark the Sundays in Advent leading up to Christmas. This beautiful devotion has found its way into many churches. Because the Advent wreath is, at its core, a private devotion there is great flexibility in how one incorporates it into their homes and how parishes incorporate it into the environment in their churches.

The *Book of Blessings* provides some guidance on the use of an Advent wreath in a parish setting. The following instruction concerns the blessing of the Advent wreath on the First Sunday of Advent:

“The use of the Advent Wreath is a traditional practice which has found its place in the Church as well as in the home. The blessing of an Advent Wreath takes place on the First Sunday of Advent or on the evening before the First Sunday of Advent. The blessing may be celebrated during Mass, a celebration of the Word of God, or Evening Prayer.”¹

The *Book of Blessings* also gives a description of a customary Advent wreath.² Often times an Advent wreath is constructed of a circle of evergreen branches with four candles in them. While three violet and one rose color are often used, the candles used for the Advent wreath can be any color. The usage of three violet candles and one rose color candle corresponds to the four Sundays in Advent. The three violet candles correspond to the First, Second, and Fourth Sundays of Advent and the rose color candle corresponds to the Third Sunday of Advent, often known as Gaudete (or Rejoice) Sunday. In some places there is also a fifth white candle which is placed in the center of the wreath and is lit during Christmastime.

The *Book of Blessings* suggests that the Advent wreath be either hung from the ceiling, or placed on a stand. In either case, however, it is important that “[i]f the Advent Wreath is to be used in church, it should be of sufficient size to be visible to the congregation.”³ This is further accentuated in *Built of Living Stones* from the USCCB concerning art, architecture, and worship.⁴

The *Book of Blessings* also gives instructions for the lighting of the Advent wreath. As alluded to above, the lighting of the Advent wreath begins after a blessing of the wreath either at the vigil to the First Sunday in Advent, or at Mass or a celebration of the Word on the First Sunday of Advent. Often the practice is to bless and light the Advent wreath during Mass on the First Sunday of Advent. In such a case, the *Book of Blessings* recommends that the blessing and lighting of the Advent wreath be done after the General Intercessions. However, the blessing and lighting of the Advent wreath could also be incorporated into the Introductory Rites, or the Liturgy of the Word. After the First Sunday of Advent the *Book of Blessings* suggests that the candles be lit before Mass, or after the opening prayer. However, they are to be done with no additional rites or prayers,⁵ though a simple verse and response of “Jesus Christ is the light of the world: a light no darkness can overpower” seems more than appropriate.

The Advent wreath began among central Europeans and was a circle of evergreens hung horizontally from the ceiling. The open center of the Advent wreath acted as a portal into heaven. It since has evolved and often takes on many forms. Parishes should feel free to be creative with their Advent wreaths, within the norms of liturgical practice, and in a way which “enhance[s] the prayer and understanding of the parish community.”⁶ In this way, the Advent wreath should never detract from the celebration of the Eucharist but serve to heighten its importance and the importance of the Advent season.

One creative idea which has worked in some parishes is the placement of a bowl of burning incense beneath the suspended wreath to represent our prayers rising as incense to heaven. For other creative ideas see Peter Mazar’s book *To Crown the Year*.

Above all, when using an Advent wreath in a church, it is important to be safe. Evergreens are highly flammable and there is always a risk that they could catch on fire with lit candles so nearby. Please be cautious in your usage of Advent wreaths and make sure that a lit Advent wreath is never left unattended.

Sources:

Catholic Church. *Book of Blessings: Approved for Use in the Dioceses of the United States of America by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and Confirmed by the Apostolic See*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1989.

Catholic Church. *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship*. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 2000.

Mazar, Peter. *To Crown the Year: Decorating the Church Through the Seasons*. Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995.

¹ *Book of Blessings*, §1509.

² *Ibid.*, §1510.

³ *Ibid.*, §1512

⁴ *Built of Living Stones*, §128.

⁵ *Book of Blessings*, §1513.

⁶ *Built of Living Stones*, §128.

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