

The Season of Advent

The historical development of Advent is quite complicated; however, the first traces of a particular Advent liturgy are found in 5th century Ravenna (Italy). In this liturgy, the expectation of Christ's birth was the central theme. In Rome, the first Advent liturgy can be seen in the 6th century and the development of the four Sundays of Advent in the sacramentary of Gregory the Great. As in Ravenna, in Rome the "original focus of Advent was not so much on expectation of the final coming (the parousia) as on the incarnation of Christ and on preparation for its liturgical celebration."¹

While in Ravenna and Rome, Advent was focused on the celebration of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the person of Jesus, in Gaul (modern day France) the emphasis was placed on the coming of the Lord for judgment. Thus, in Gaul, Advent took on a penitential feel like Lent: "in the Gallic liturgies and others the Gloria and alleluia were dropped from the Mass and the Te Deum from the Office, and purple vestments were used."²

In the 12th century, Roman liturgical practice during Advent was influenced by the liturgical practices in Gaul. Thus, the Roman liturgy came to take on a penitential feel, as can be seen in the omission of the Gloria and the wearing of purple vestments. However, for Rome "Advent was not regarded as properly a penitential season, as can be seen from the fact that the joyous alleluia was retained."³ Furthermore, the commentary on the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year* states that the Gloria "is not omitted for the same reason as it is omitted in Lent, but in order that on the night of Christmas the angels' song may ring out once again in all its newness."⁴ Yet there still seems to be a penitential character to Advent.

The *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar* give credence to the twofold understanding of Advent: "Advent has a twofold character, for it is a time of preparation for the Solemnities 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."⁵ Thus, Advent is a festive time where we first celebrate the incarnation and the Second Coming of Christ, and only secondarily prepare for the Judgment at the return of the Lord.

The First Sunday of Advent – Violet

The readings of the First Sunday of Advent (Cycle A: Mt 24:37-44; B: Mk 13:33-37; C: Lk 21:25-28, 34-36) speak about the Lord's return and the need for us to be watchful. The Opening Collect for the First Sunday of Advent attests to the Lord's return and our watchfulness:

"Grant your faithful, we pray, almighty God,
the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ
with righteous deeds at his coming,

so that, gathered at his right hand,
they may be worthy to possess the heavenly Kingdom...”⁶

It is easy to see the centrality of the return of Christ, and our watchfulness in the beautiful phrase which requests that we “run forth to meet your Christ.” Thus, the First Sunday of Advent attests to the Second Coming of Christ and our watchfulness, while expressing a penitential quality as well.

The Second Sunday of Advent – Violet

The reading of the Second Sunday of Advent (Cycle A: Mt. 3:1-12; B: Mk. 1:1-8; C: Lk. 3:1-6) are about John the Baptist’s call to Israel for repentance. Thus, these readings call us to prepare ourselves for the Lord with a penitential heart. The Opening Collect for the Second Sunday of Advent attests to this penitential feel:

“Almighty and merciful God,
may no earthly undertaking hinder those
who set out in haste to meet your Son,
but may our learning of heavenly wisdom
gain us admittance to his company....”⁷

This collect, while speaking to the coming of Christ, asks that we might be freed from those things which might hinder us from meeting Christ at his coming. Thus, in the Second Sunday of Advent we see the penitential understanding of the season shining through.

The Third Sunday of Advent – Gaudete Sunday – Rose (or Violet)

The Third Sunday of Advent is named Gaudete Sunday after the first word of Entrance Antiphon, which in Latin is Gaudete. Gaudete means ‘rejoice.’ The Entrance Antiphon is “Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I say, rejoice. Indeed, the Lord is near.”⁸ With the usage of rose colored vestments we can see the overall joyful emphasis of this Sunday. This Sunday replaces the sober penitential tone of the First and Second Sundays of Advent with a joyous and anticipatory mood. In many ways, it parallels the Fourth Sunday of Lent, Laetare Sunday, which also interrupts the penitential tone of Lent with a more joyous one. The readings for this Sunday (Cycle A: Mt. 11:2-11; B: Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28; C: Lk. 3:10-18) all deal with John as the one who is preparing the way for the Lord. The Opening Collect for Gaudete Sunday attests to its joyous feel:

“O God, who see how your people
faithfully await the feast of the Lord’s Nativity,
enable us, we pray,
to attain the joys of so great a salvation
and to celebrate them always with solemn worship and glad rejoicing...”⁹

This collect sums up well the tone of Gaudete Sunday. Thus the Third Sunday of Advent strongly focuses us on the coming celebration of Christmas, the Incarnation of Christ.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent – Violet

The readings of the Fourth Sunday of Advent (A: Mt 1:18-24; B: Lk 1:26-38; C: Lk 1:39-47) begin the preparation of the feast of our Lord's birth. All the readings for this Sunday deal with the events which precede Christ's birth. The Entrance Antiphon best attests to the preparatory feel of this Sunday: "Drop down dew from above, you heavens, and let the clouds rain down the Just One; let the earth be opened and bring forth a Savior." We can also see the preparatory feel of this Sunday in the Opening Collect:

"Pour forth, we beseech you, O Lord,
your grace into our hearts,
that we, to whom the Incarnation of Christ your Son
was made known by the message of an Angel,
may by his Passion and Cross
be brought to the glory of his Resurrection..."¹⁰

Thus, in the Fourth Sunday of Advent we prepare ourselves for the coming Incarnation of our Lord.

The Weekdays of Advent from December 17th to the Morning of December 24th – Violet

These weekday liturgies that lead up to Christmas are particularly special ones. Their alleluia verses use the famous O-Antiphons from the Liturgy of the Hours. They cause us to reflect on the coming Incarnation of Christ and the biblical motifs surround the Savior.

1. Come, Wisdom of our God Most High (*O Sapientia*).
2. Come, Leader of ancient Israel (*O Adonai*).
3. Come, Flower of Jesse's stem (*O radix Jesse*).
4. Come, Key of David (*O clavis David*).
5. Come, Radiant Dawn (*O Oriens*).
6. Come, King of all nations (*O Rex gentium*).
7. Come, Emmanuel (*O Emmanuel*)

These verses provide a powerful tool for meditation on the coming Incarnation of Christ on Christmas day.

As can be seen, the Advent season eagerly celebrates the Incarnation of our Lord, and His coming again. While Advent is primarily a joyous occasion and celebration, it also has a penitential quality to it. This is because Christ's Second Coming brings with it His judgment.

Celebrate every Advent season with joyful anticipation for the celebration of Christ's Incarnation, and His Second Coming in Glory. Use Advent as a time to celebrate Christ and to reflect on your relationship with Him. The Christian hope is that when Christ comes again we might all run forth to meet Him. The Opening Collect for the morning Mass of December 24th, the last liturgy of the Advent season, sums up well the character of the Christian attitude during Advent:

“Come quickly, we pray, Lord Jesus,
and do not delay,
that those who trust in your compassion
may find solace and relief in your coming.
Who live and reign with God the Father
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.
Amen.”¹¹

Sources

Adam, Adolf. *The Liturgical Year: Its History & Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*. New York: Pueblo Pub. Co, 1981.

Catholic Church. *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of The Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2011.

¹ Adam, 131.

² Ibid., 131.

³ Ibid., 131.

⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁵ Roman Missal, *Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*, §39.

⁶ Ibid., *First Sunday of Advent*.

⁷ Ibid., *Second Sunday of Advent*.

⁸ Ibid., *Third Sunday of Advent*.

⁹ Ibid., *Third Sunday of Advent*.

¹⁰ Ibid., *Fourth Sunday of Advent*.

¹¹ Ibid., *December 24: The Morning Mass*.

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