

Proclaiming Jesus through Advent & Christmas Symbols

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Many of us spend late October to December buying or making gifts for Christmas. Yet there is so much more to “Advent.” In Latin the word means, “the coming” or “arrival.” What or who is coming? Santa, a herd of relatives, Jesus? How can we share the coming of Jesus in our families, neighborhoods, and parishes?

The primary symbol of the Advent and Christmas Seasons is Jesus Christ the Lord come to us in human flesh. Advent and Christmas celebrate the three comings of Jesus: his birth over 2000 years ago in Bethlehem, his coming into our hearts today, and his Second Coming at the end of time. Come, Lord Jesus!

...The one name that contains everything is the one that the Son of God received in his incarnation: JESUS. . . The name ‘Jesus’ contains all: God and man and the whole economy of creation and salvation. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2666)

Below are fourteen common traditions through which we can proclaim Jesus through image and symbol during Advent and Christmas. Yet we will need to explain them, because of the disconnect between Christian faith and people’s everyday experience of the seasons over the past five decades:

1. **Advent Season violet colored vestments** in Church that represent humility, penance, and the royal color of Jesus our King.
2. **Advent Calendar** of paper, plastic, wood, cloth, or candy mark off the 25 days or four weeks before Jesus comes as an infant on Christmas Day, making all life sacred from womb to tomb.
3. **Advent Wreath** includes four candles (three purple, one rose—Jesus Christ is the light of the world, who sends to believers the fire of the Holy Spirit), evergreens (immortality, life, and growth), and a circle (eternity and unending love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—no end and no beginning).
4. **Jesse Tree** uses symbols from salvation history (from creation to the birth of Christ) to illustrate the spiritual genealogy of the ancestors of Christ in Jewish history. In the Old Testament, Jesse was the father of King David and Jesus is a descendent of David.
5. **Santa Claus & Christmas Gifts**—St. Nicholas Day (Dec. 6). St. Nick was a bishop, witness, and defender of the Christian Faith (Myra, Turkey, 4th century). He loved Jesus so much that after his parents died he gave his family fortune to the poor and became a priest. During his ministry he performed many miracles for the poor and suffering. He is a witness of the call to give our lives and treasures to Jesus and to others, much like the Magi who gave homage to the infant Jesus, through gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

6. **Christmas Star**—The Magi (wise men) saw an unusual star in the sky and believed that it heralded the birth of a king. They followed that star to Bethlehem where it pointed out the place where Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were. In recent times, the Blessed Virgin Mary has been called the “star of evangelization.” Like the Christmas Star, she points us toward her son, Jesus.
7. **Our Lady of Guadalupe** (Dec. 12). The Blessed Mother appeared to St. Juan Diego in 16th century Mexico to tell of her great love for the native people of the Americas. Her apparitions evangelized millions to Christ in just a few short years, and is sometimes associated with the poinsettia plant (flower of the Holy Night or Christmas Eve).
8. **Nativity Sets**—In 1223 AD St. Francis of Assisi first used a live crèche or manger scene at Christmas to teach the poor about the Good news of Jesus coming. During the weeks of Advent the figures of Joseph and Mary can move slowly toward the stable at Bethlehem, reenacting their journey to where Jesus was born.
9. **Christmas Tree**—The Christmas tree highlights the value of life and in winter is a sign of undying life. Christians see it as the "tree of life" (Genesis 2:9), pointing us toward Christ, the ultimate gift of God to humanity. “The Christmas tree, with its twinkling lights, reminds us that with the birth of Jesus the tree of life has blossomed anew in the desert of humanity....” (Pope St. John Paul II).
10. **Christmas carols**—Christ-centered carols are said to have started with St. Francis of Assisi (1223 AD). The most famous Christmas carols were written between the 16th and 19th centuries. They proclaim the gospel message using the titles of Jesus in the Old and New Testaments.
11. **Christmas ornaments** were originally apples (like those from the tree in the Garden of Eden) and bread wafers (Jesus Christ, the bread of life, Eucharist) that were hung on the Christmas tree.
12. **Christmas lights**—Fire is a Biblical symbol of God’s presence and power come to be with us in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. In the 19th century electric lights replaced candles.
13. **Christmas cards**—Originating in 19th century England, Christ-centered Christmas cards proclaim the gospel message, depict the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus, or use symbols like the Star of Bethlehem or a dove reminding us of the Holy Spirit and peace.
14. **Christmas liturgical season** uses white vestments to symbolize the fire, light, innocence, purity, joy, triumph, glory of Jesus among us. This season lasts from Christmas Day until the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus in January (12 days).

St. Alphonsus Liguori believed that Christmas Day should “be called the day of fire, on which a God came as a little child to cast the fire of love into the hearts of men. Let us consider...how the eternal Word had no other end in becoming man than to inflame us with his divine love.” (Anthony F. Chiffolo, *Advent and Christmas with the Saints*, Liguori Publications, 2003, p. 5)

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