

# Looking Ahead: Plan Now for the ADVENT WREATH

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*The following two articles offer a chance for reflection on the Advent wreath, as we approach this season. Michael McConnell and St Mary's parish in Gisbourne offer two valuable perspectives on this Advent symbol, helping to illuminate its place in the season.*

The European tradition of marking the Advent Season with a wreath of greenery placed in the Sanctuary area originated in Germany, but has become a popular feature nowadays in many countries, New Zealand being no exception. The Advent Wreath has no liturgical significance and is not mentioned in the liturgical books; it is "popular" in the original sense of 'coming from the people', being rich in symbolism which represents some fundamental Christian beliefs:

- The circle of the wreath represents eternity with no beginning and no end.
- The evergreen leaves represent hope and growth toward everlasting life.
- The purple ribbons binding the greenery and suspending the wreath remind us that Advent is penitential season of preparation both for the coming of Jesus Christ at Christmas, and for his second coming at the end of time.
- There are four candles fixed in the wreath, one for each of the four Sundays of Advent: three are purple, one is pink. These are lit progressively during the Sundays of Advent, with the pink candle being lit on the third Sunday – "Gaudete Sunday" – and representing the joy which is building with the imminent approach of

Christmas (and perhaps the joy of a fasting community that the penitential season has reached its halfway mark!) "Rose-coloured" vestments may still be worn by the priest on this Sunday instead of purple.

#### A Winter Season:

In the northern hemisphere where this tradition originated, the winter season would be at its bleakest: evergreens such as fir, holly and ivy being the only foliage, all bearing witness that growth still survived, and that earth's yearly cycle of new life would soon return.

In the depths of winter, churches would be gloomy in the morning hours of extended darkness: the symbolism of the light of the candles as they were progressively lit would be easily grasped. As Advent was a penitential season of fasting similar to Lent, no flower decorations (even had they been available) were permitted in the sanctuary or on the altar, so that the evergreen wreath with its coloured candles became the substitute decoration. The wreath was a large and visible symbol, suspended from the ceiling of the church. I am told that in the main churches in Indonesia even today, the wreath – as large as a wagon wheel – is suspended over the

main altar. Its candles are lit (with difficulty!) using the candle lighter/snuffers on extended poles with altar servers used to struggle with in our earlier "High Altar" days.

#### Practical Considerations:

- If we are to adopt the Advent Wreath in our New Zealand liturgies for this season, then let it be a large and powerful symbol, easily seen by the whole congregation, which we use to honour the coming of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.
- The wreath should be suspended to maximize its effect. It may not be practical to hand it from the ceiling, or from a bracket high on a sidewall, but there are alternatives.
- At St Joseph's Cathedral, Dunedin, a large wrought-iron freestanding candlestick is utilized. Formerly designed for the Paschal candle, it now sprouts instead a gilded wooden pole fitted with brass hooks to receive the chains (covered with purple ribbon sleeves) attached to the wreath base (a standard lamp stand could be

similarly adapted, if no large candlestick is available).

- A professional florist constructed the wreath base to specification. Besides the permanently attached chains, it has four brass cups fixed to the upper surface: the four (fat) candles simply sit in these (no danger of wax dripping on the carpet!).
- The week before Advent Sunday, the wreath base is returned to the florist who decorates it with ornamental drooping fir fronds entwined with purple ribbon (originally to hold the greenery to the base) and purple ribbon bows at the base of each candle (originally the lashing required to attach the candles to the frame).
- Prayers can be said at the lighting of the candles each Sunday. Appendix A gives the prayers for the Advent Sundays Year C, (the Liturgy Centre holds copies of the Prayers for the Year A and Year B cycles). After the opening greeting at Mass, the celebrant moves

to the wreath, lights the appropriate candle(s) in silence, (taking the taper from the altar candles if these are already lit) and says the prayer. He then moves back to the chair, and mass proceeds as usual.

- With constant "misting" of water, the large fir fronds retain their freshness (and greenness) until Christmas Eve. The wreath and its component parts are then dismantled, carefully labeled and stored until the subsequent Advent.

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