



## Carmelite Spiritual Center

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### Life is Worth Giving

ADVENT WREATH IS REMINDER OF BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH

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One of the more enduring Christian symbols connected with the Christmas Season is the Advent wreath still found in many churches and homes at this time of the year. It is an expression of the longing people have for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, at Christmas. Yet its true origins go back far beyond the Christian era.

The present-day wreath is a custom handed on by German Lutherans and begun a few hundred years ago. It is to be noted that before the advent of Christianity in Europe, many of the tribal people who are our ancestors regarded the darkness as evil and as something to be both feared and overcome. To combat the darkness of the cold winter months, especially in Northern Europe, many Germanic and Scandinavian tribes would hold festivals of light to celebrate events in their folklore. The light would eventually triumph over darkness, and all would be well again.

These pre-Christian tribal peoples celebrated the month of Yule (December) with the burning of yule logs throughout the month to bring light and cheerfulness to their homes.

Medieval Christians retained many of the light and fire symbols as popular customs, and by the 16th Century they became prominent religious symbols of Advent in their homes and later in their churches. At various times the Advent wreath found its way closer and closer to the altar, and even at times near or on the altar itself. For quite some years now, however, the Advent wreath has had an honored place in most churches but AT an acceptable distance from the altar.

#### The Wreath Itself

Several explanations are given as to how the wreath got its origin. One explanation, from Scandinavian folklore, is that these northern people brought their tools and wagon wheels into their homes for the winter as a protection against theft, and also to assure that they wouldn't warp or crack. This meant that they had to be put near the fireplace or hung from the ceiling. Soon the wheels were decorated with evergreens and candles. In time families began to gather around to tell stories, sing yule and other songs, and also prayed together to pass the long and cold winter nights.

#### German Custom

Whatever its Nordic origins, it was the German Lutherans in the 16th Century who incorporated the Advent wreath into the Christian tradition to add meaning to the Birth of Jesus Christ, and also His Second Coming.

Along with the Christmas tree ("O! Tannebaum"), or literally the "spruce tree," it was the German immigrants who brought these Old World customs to early America, and they remain a significant part of our Christmas customs.

The Germans made the Advent wreaths of evergreens to symbolize the everlasting salvation brought by the birth of Christ. It was also a reminder to all of the never-ending and ever-living circle of God's care surrounding his people both in time and eternity. The wreath itself was either suspended from the ceiling of the home or placed on a table or stand, often in front of a family religious shrine.

Of the four candles on the wreath, three are usually purple to symbolize the solemn and somewhat sad waiting period of Advent before the arrival of the Messiah. A rose-colored candle, however, is lighted on the third Sunday of Advent called "Gaudete" (Rejoice) Sunday when Christians are reminded that the Messiah has already come and redeemed each of us.

Other people also have the custom on Christmas Day itself of replacing the burned-down purple and rose candles with a new white one in the center of the wreath to announce Christ's coming into the world and making it a new creation. The world now belongs in a special way to the Messiah who was promised to Israel centuries ago.

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Still other families gather at a certain time, usually before supper, for a brief religious observance which includes an Advent prayer and the lighting of the candles. Originally used as a ritual for families as a reminder to prepare spiritually for the coming of the Messiah, the tradition gradually made its way into churches and the Liturgy. It was usually, however, a prelude to the offering of Mass although some parishes perform the ceremony of the Advent wreath after the Gospel and homily.

In essence, the traditional symbolism of the wreath is to remind young and old of the centuries of the Old Testament when all humanity was in some spiritual darkness awaiting the "Light" of Jesus Christ.

#### Conclusion

The Advent wreath, then, is an ancient symbol of the victory of light over darkness, and also the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah, the coming of Jesus Christ, and the glory of His birth in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago.

PRAYER: O God, by whose word all things are sanctified, pour forth Your blessing upon this wreath, and grant that all who use it may prepare their hearts for the coming of Jesus, and may receive from You abundant graces. Amen.