

Memo: Popular Pieties of Advent and Christmas



Introduction

Various expressions of popular piety connected with Advent and Christmas have emerged throughout the centuries. These have sustained the faith of many people from one generation to the next, conserving many valuable aspects of the liturgical season of Advent.

Primary amongst these expressions of popular piety is the Advent Wreath, the Crib and the Jesse Tree. The Christmas Tree, possibly the most popular of all, is more a cultural symbol than one of popular piety, though it is featured in the Book of Blessings.

Each year, in the weeks prior to Advent, the Office of Worship and Prayer receives questions from parishes, most frequently about the Advent Wreath and sometimes about Christmas Trees. Commonly people are seeking advice on their inclusion in the Church environment and the Sunday liturgy.

The following pastoral guidance is offered in response to these questions and to assist parishes in discerning the use of such symbols and devotions in their celebration of the Advent and Christmas Seasons.

Resources

Several resources are available to assist local communities in their discernment:

- [The General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar](#).
- The Missal – the Proper for the Advent and Christmas Seasons – and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal.
- Book of Blessings – available on LiturgyHelp
- [Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy](#)
- [Advent and Christmas \(Commentary\)](#) – From the Catholic Church in Australia website. This article is very informative, particularly towards the end where it addresses the devotions identified in this resource.

These resources reveal some points that inform our local discernment:

- There is no reference to the Advent Wreath, the Christmas Crib, the Jesse Tree or Christmas Tree in the Missal or the *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar*. This is because the first three belong to the category of 'popular devotions' not 'liturgy,' and the Christmas Tree is more cultural than devotional.
- The Book of Blessings is our most helpful resource, offering guidance and prayers.
- The *Directory on Popular Piety ...* references a range of devotions associated with Advent and Christmas that are seldom thought of in Australia. Some communities may find this interesting.

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The Advent Wreath

First amongst these popular devotions is the Advent Wreath – four candles within a circle of greenery – has become a symbol of Advent in many Christian homes leading up to Christmas. Lighting an Advent Wreath candle each Sunday recollects the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ's coming, and is a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf. Mal 3:20; Lk 1:78). [Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy – Principles and Guidelines \(n. 96\)](#)

As indicated in the *Book of Blessings* the Advent Wreath belongs most comfortably in our homes. However, many of the faithful love to see an Advent Wreath in our Churches. If the community decides to have an Advent Wreath in the Church, use of the Wreath during the liturgy follows the instructions found in the *Book of Blessings* (a 1509 – 1516):

- Care needs to be taken in positioning the Wreath. (a 1512) Note: 'Presbyterium' means 'sanctuary'.
- It is blessed during the liturgy on the First Sunday of Advent in accord with the *Book of Blessings* – see 'Order of Blessing within Mass' a. 1517ff. Note this blessing takes place after the Universal Prayer NOT in the Introductory Rites.
- It may be blessed at another time outside the Sunday liturgy. (see a. 1509)
- When in a Church, on the second, third and fourth Sundays of Advent, the Advent Wreath candles are lit in one of two places during the liturgy and with no accompanying prayer and ritual. (a. 1513)

"We use the Book of Blessings for the Saturday evening Mass and then simply have someone light the candle without ceremony before subsequent Masses begin throughout Advent... I think it lends more authenticity to say that prayer just once". [Fr Paul Turner]

We have grown beyond the old practice of a ritual and prayers accompanying the lighting of the candles during the Introductory Rites on each Sunday of Advent. This is because of our developing appreciation of the difference and relationship between devotion and liturgy.

Advent, and particularly the Advent Wreath, provides an opportunity to foster prayer and devotion in the domestic church, particularly amongst those who may not join us regularly for Sunday worship.

Well ahead of Advent, and using good communication and promotions, families could be encouraged and resourced to have an Advent Wreath at home. If the Advent Wreath in the church building is blessed outside of Sunday liturgy, families could be invited to bring their Advent Wreath and have it blessed. They could be provided with a resource, such as the suggestion included in the *Book of Blessings* a 1515, or the old dialogue prayer mentioned above could be given to families to pray at home.

Such an invitation is one way of growing our contact with the wider circle of the faithful beyond those who participate in Sunday worship. Such growth may begin small and grow with patient tending over the years. It may be something that the parish could work on with the local school community.

The Christmas crib

It would seem that all our parishes place a Christmas Crib in the church. Most questions that come to the Office of Worship and Prayer are about where to position it and when to do so.

The *Book of Blessings* includes an 'Order of Blessing of a Christmas Manager or Nativity Scene' (a 1541 – 1546). The inference there is that the crib appears around the time of the Vigil of Christmas.

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The *Book of Blessings* has some suggestions that may develop into new pastoral strategies in the parish. The idea of incorporating the Blessing of the Crib into a carol service could spark a range of ideas.

The Jesse Tree

Information for the use of a Jesse Tree is found towards the end of the article - [Advent and Christmas \(Commentary\)](#)

A Christmas Tree

As already suggested the Christmas tree is more a cultural than devotional phenomenon. There is an 'Order for Blessing of a Christmas Tree' in the *Book of Blessings* which once again offers guidance and practical suggestions for parish communities to consider. (p. 669ff) It indicates the Christmas Tree belongs most naturally in homes. If placed in a Church, this happens at Christmas and the tree remains for the duration of the Christmas Season through to the Epiphany.

A Christmas Tree is best positioned in the foyer of the Church or somewhere in the nave.

If you require further support, please contact the Office of Worship and Prayer: E:
worshipandprayer@mn.catholic.org.au

From: The Diocesan Liturgy Council
April, 2024