



# Theology Corner

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*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation*

## “Why an Advent Wreath?”

Advent has begun! O come, O come, Emmanuel! You may have noticed that we now have an Advent wreath in the church, but do you know why? This custom actually originated in the Middle Ages in the Catholic Church, but was adapted to something closer to what we have now in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Germany (not the best time in Catholic history, I know), but Christians in America began adopting this tradition as it was brought in by German immigrants in the early 1900's. Remember, just because something originated as Protestant (or even as pagan!), does not make it wrong by association. Throughout history, wreaths or laurels have represented victory over persecution and suffering (just as Christ was victorious over sin and death), and also a representation of glory. You may recall seeing statues or paintings of Greek leaders wearing laurels on their heads. The circular shape of the wreath is also commonly recognized as a representation of both God's unending love and the immortality of our souls (having never ending life) so long as we follow the light as Christ guides us to everlasting life.

There are four candles in a Catholic Advent wreath: three purple-colored and one rose-colored. The four candles represent the four weeks in the Advent season. The first candle lit (purple) symbolizes hope. It is sometimes referred to as a “prophecy candle” representing the prophets who had foretold the birth of Christ. The second candle (purple) symbolizes faith sometimes also called the “Bethlehem candle” representing Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. The third candle (rose) symbolizes joy. One thing you will notice is that the color of the candle for each week of Advent is consistent with the liturgical colors as well. For example, purple is the traditional liturgical color for the Advent season. The rose-colored candle is lit on Gaudete Sunday which is meant to serve as a reminder of the joy that we experience in the birth of Jesus Christ. On this day, the priest also wears rose-colored vestments. I often laugh because it is common that newcomers ask the priest about his pink vestments when he wears them either on Gaudete Sunday (or Laetare Sunday in Lent), to which they will usually reply (it's not pink, it's rose!). Now, the fourth and final candle (purple) is meant to symbolize peace and also the time of prayer and penance as we prepare for the advent or “arrival” of Christ. Some more modern adaptations of the Advent wreath have a white candle that is lit on Christmas Eve to represent Christ coming into the world, but we have retained the traditional candles.

While a lot of emphasis has been made on the candle color, the primary significance is on the light that the candle produces. In 2 Corinthians 4:6, St. Paul says, “For it is the God who said, ‘Let the light shine out of darkness’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Just as the people awaited in a sort of “spiritual darkness” awaiting the coming of the Messiah who is the light of the world, likewise, the symbolism in the Advent wreath is that with each candle lit, the darkness is slowly being pushed out by the light until the darkness is overcome by Christ the Light when he is born! For it is by the light of Christ that our path may be lit as we are led out of spiritual darkness and into true spiritual life. This time of anticipation of Christ's coming commemorates his *historical* coming, his coming into our lives *by grace*, and his *final return* at the end of time.

While we have a wreath in the church during the Advent season, it could also be a good idea to have one in your home to serve as a daily reminder for the whole family to remain vigilant and to keep the true meaning of Christmas in our hearts and minds!