

Why is Advent Important?

The word Advent derives from the Latin word meaning “coming” or “to come.” The Lord is coming. We may reflect that every year at this time we celebrate his coming, so that in a sense we can lose the feeling of expectancy and joyful anticipation, because at the end of the season, everything seems to return to pretty much the same routine. If that is the case, then our preparation may have been lacking and we have therefore been robbed of much of the true meaning of this season.

During Advent we recall the history of God's people and reflect on how the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament were fulfilled. This gives us a background for the present. Today we can reflect on the past track record of God and so begin to understand what it means to us now for the sake of what is to come, in our own future and that of our world.

Preparation for Christmas is an important theme for Advent, but more is involved. Advent gives us a vision of our lives as Christians and shows us the possibilities of life. The vision of life that Advent gives us is twofold; it looks back to the first coming of Christ at Bethlehem, and it looks to the future when Christ will come again. In the interval between these two events we find meaning for our life as a Christian.

First we celebrate Christ-become-human. We view his life and experience his presence as a human being in our history. Christ came to show us what life can and should be. He gave us true and valid principles by which we can live true and valid lives. But Jesus knew that the human heart could not live in isolation. He formed the Church around the concept of a people held together by love. In that community we discover unlimited possibilities and meaning. Alone we can do nothing. Together we find real meaning. When Christ left this earth, he did not abandon us. He remains with us in his Spirit, the Church, the sacraments, the Scriptures and each other. He lives in community with us and keeps his vision of life before us. When Christ comes again, his presence will no longer be hidden behind the signs and symbols of the liturgy or the words of the Scriptures. His presence among us will be revealed in all its fullness, a presence that will never end, a presence that will perfect and complete our community. This is the "greater significance" of Advent. In these few short weeks we take in the sweeping panorama of time - from Christ's birth to his Second Coming. The season of Advent brings us the magnificent vision of life and hope for the future given to us by Christ.

Advent is our time to become more involved, more caught up in the meaning and the possibilities of life as a Christian community. Thus we are preparing not only for Christmas but also for Christ's Second Coming. This means that when he comes again, we will be awake and watchful. He will not find us asleep.

St. Nicholas – December 6

St. Nicholas was born in Lycia, Asia Minor, (modern-day Turkey), and died as Bishop of Myra in 352. He practiced both the spiritual and temporal works of mercy, and fasted twice a week

Saint Nicholas, bishop of Myra, is undoubtedly one of the most popular saints honored in the Western world. In the United States, his memory has survived in the unique personality of Santa Claus — the jolly, rotund, white-bearded gentleman who captivates children with promises of gifts on Christmas Eve. Considered primarily as the patron saint of children, Nicholas is also invoked by sailors, merchants, bakers, travelers and pawnbrokers, and with Saint Andrew is honored as the co-patron of Russia. He was born in the last years of the third century in Asia Minor. His uncle, the archbishop of Myra in Lycia, ordained him and appointed him abbot of a nearby monastery. At the death of the archbishop, Nicholas was chosen to fill the vacancy, and he served in this position until his death. About the time of the persecutions of Diocletian, he was imprisoned for preaching Christianity but was released during the reign of Emperor Constantine.

Popular legends have involved Saint Nicholas in a number of charming stories, one of which relates Nicholas' charity toward the poor. A man of Patara had lost his fortune, and finding himself unable to support his three maiden daughters, was planning to turn them into the streets as prostitutes. Nicholas heard of the man's intentions and secretly threw three bags of gold through a window into the home, thus providing dowries for the daughters. The three bags of gold mentioned in this story are said to be the origin of the three gold balls that form the emblem of pawnbrokers.

After Nicholas' death on December 6 his body was buried in the cathedral at Myra. It remained there until 1087, when seamen of Bari, an Italian coastal town, seized the relics of the saint and transferred them to their own city. Veneration for Nicholas had already spread throughout Europe as well as Asia, but this occurrence led to a renewal of devotion in the West. Countless miracles were attributed to the saint's intercession. His relics are still preserved in the church of San Nicola in Bari; an oily substance, known as *Manna di S. Nicola*, which is highly valued for its medicinal powers, is said to flow from them.

The story of Saint Nicholas came to America in distorted fashion. The Dutch Protestants carried a popularized version of the saint's life to New Amsterdam, portraying Nicholas as nothing more than a Nordic magician and wonder-worker. Our present-day conception of Santa Claus has grown from this version. Catholics should think of Nicholas as a saint, a confessor of the faith and the bishop of Myra — not merely as a jolly man from the North Pole who brings happiness to small children. Many countries and locations honor St. Nicholas as patron: Greece, Russia, the Kingdom of Naples, Sicily, Lorraine, and many cities in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Belgium.