

THE SEASONS OF ADVENT & CHRISTMAS

*Don't get caught up in Shopping, Stressing, Planning & Buying;
Come to take part in Waiting, To expect, To hope & To pray.*

WHEN DOES ADVENT BEGIN AND END?

Advent is the four week period before Christmas when **The Catholic Church** and others celebrate the first coming of Christ while anticipating His second coming. Advent can begin on any date inclusively between November 27 and December 3 (explore Liturgical Calendar webpage).

THE HISTORY OF ADVENT

The New Testament identifies Jesus as the expected Jewish Messiah, although Jesus was not the Messiah, most Jews at the time, expected- a warrior who would forcibly overthrow the Romans. The gospel writers are clear that Jesus did not come to establish an earthly kingdom or deliver the Jewish people from the Romans, but rather He proclaimed a heavenly kingdom available to Jew and Gentile alike. Even though early Christians understood that Jesus reigned in the Church, they knew that all things had not been subjected fully to Him, so Christians understood that there existed future finalization of His kingdom (**Catechism of the Catholic Church #680**). Thus, early Christians eagerly awaited the return of Jesus in glory "to achieve the definitive triumph of good over evil," when He would judge the living and the dead (**Catechism of the Catholic Church #681 & #682**). These prominent Scriptural themes form the basis of our Advent season.

The first explicit reference to a celebration of Advent occurs in the 6th century. Before this time, celebrations and fasts were resembling our current Advent season.

St. Hilary of Poitiers (d. AD 367) and the Spanish Council of Saragossa (AD 380) spoke of a three week fast before Epiphany. Pope St. Leo the Great preached many homilies about "the fast of the tenth month (i.e., December)" prior to Christmas. The Gelasian Sacramentary (AD 750) provided liturgical material for the five Sundays before Christmas as well as Wednesdays and Fridays. The Western Church eventually settled on 4 Sundays of Advent, which has the season beginning at the very end of November or the very beginning of December, starting immediately after Ordinary Time.

WHEN DOES THE CHRISTMAS SEASON BEGIN AND END?



The Christmas Season begins with Evening Prayer on Christmas Eve and ends with Evening Prayer on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

THE MEANING & HISTORY OF CHRISTMAS

Of all the feasts throughout the year, the celebration of Christmas Day and Christmas Eve are the most popular of all- both for children and for adults. There are more traditions and customs associated with Christmas in all Christian countries than with any other feast. It is true, of course, that the logical culmination of Advent is attained with the Epiphany; the season of preparation, however, truly ends with the Nativity. The celebration of these two feasts may be explained only upon a historical basis. Christmas is the Occidental celebration of the Nativity of the Lord, and the Epiphany is the Christmas of the Orient. There is a significant difference to be noted between the two great Paschal feasts and the two great Christmas feasts. In the Easter cycle, Pentecost, with the mission of the Paraclete, represents an organic development in the work of our salvation; in the Christmas cycle, Christmas and the Epiphany center about an identical theme: the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity as Savior and King of Kings. The East adopted Christmas from the West; the Occident received the feast of the Epiphany from the Orient. These two Christmas feasts are a venerable spiritual monument of the union of the Church in East and West. In

the Roman rite, the third, or Day-Mass, of Christmas is really a Mass of Manifestation or Epiphany. The Station at St. Peter's is the same station as that of the Epiphany, and the Mass is intended to be genuinely one manifestation of the new-born Savior to the City and the World. To Christians of the Western world, Christmas always seems to be more important than the Epiphany, even though the latter feast is of higher rank. It is very true that Advent and the period of waiting and preparation are concluded with the feast of Christmas. The texts of the liturgy indicate this by saying that "Tomorrow original sin shall be destroyed," and "Open, ye Eternal Gates, that the King of Glory may enter in." The realization of the glorious visit of the great King which dominates the whole of Advent is not accomplished, however, until the feast of the Epiphany. The East has enlarged our perspective of the spiritual meaning of the Incarnation. We are elevated



above the historical fact related by the Gospels to a view of the kingship of Christ, which dominates all time and space. At Christmas, we may be said to be reborn with Christ as the Sun of the Nativity rises over the town of Bethlehem; at the Epiphany, we celebrate the mystical wedding of the King with His Spouse, the Church: the glory of the Lord shines forth in noontide splendor over Jerusalem. On the feast of Christmas, Christ is born to us in the intimacy of the family represented by Mary and the shepherds; at the Epiphany, He manifests to the entire world His glory and His kingship, which are represented by the adoration of the Magi, the baptism in the Jordan, and the marriage feast of Cana. It is necessary, furthermore, before offering suggestions for the celebration of Christmas in our cities and homes, to note some of the historical developments of a truly Christian conception of the holiday season. A readily available source of information for families concerning the history of Christmas and its tradition is to be found in *The Christmas Book* by Francis X. Weiser, SJ (pictured at left). There is no historical record- nor even a true tradition- which gives the date of the birth of Christ. The

date of December 25 was established about the year 320, and the Popes seem to have chosen the twenty-fifth day of December principally to divert the attention of the people from the celebration of a pagan feast of the Mithras cult which was called the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun" (Natalis Solis Invicti). This does not, in any manner, indicate that Christmas is merely a "Christianized" pagan feast, for Christians of that time realized with St. John Chrysostom: "The pagans call December 25 the Birthday of the Unconquered. Who is indeed so unconquered as Our Lord?.. or, if they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, He is the Sun of Justice." Throughout the Middle Ages, Christmas came to be celebrated more and more. Especially during the period from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries all the arts and crafts of the Christian nations were made serviceable to the festivities associated with the Nativity of the Savior. Plays and songs, carols and dances, spices and flowers, images and statues — all creation were made to serve the celebration of the feast. The foundation of all these customs and traditions was always Holy Mass — the Christ-Mass — the Divine Office and the sacramentals. In many countries of Europe, a sharp change in the Christmas solemnities came with the Reformation during the sixteenth century. The spiritual and scriptural foundation of the liturgy, including the Mass itself, was ridiculed and forbidden. The Calvinists and Puritans in particular condemned all religious celebration of the feast, and when the "new" method of celebrating Christmas was revived, it tended to become only a more or less pagan feast of good-natured and humanitarian reveling. The attempt was particularly successful in England, and post-Reformation English attitudes concerning Christmas have affected most of our notions concerning the celebration of the holidays. When the Puritans came to political power in England, they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas (see above). They contended that no feast of the human institution should ever outrank the Sabbath (Sunday). Since Christmas was the most important of the non-Sunday festivals, it was abolished altogether. The first ordinances issued forbidding church services, and civic festivities on Christmas came in 1642, finally, on June 3, 1647, Parliament enacted a ruling that the feast should no longer be observed under pain of punishment. Riots and strife broke out among the people, but the government stood firm and even broke up celebrations by force of arms, though the punishments were not too severely inflicted. With the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the observance of the "old" Christmas returned with a "new" attitude. The religious

observance of Christmas was almost entirely replaced by amusement and reveling over plum pudding, goose, capon, minced pie, and roast beef, with decorations of mistletoe, holly, and ivy, and the yule log. Two of the best exemplifications of this "new Christmas without Christ" are to be found in the Christmas Stories of Charles Dickens, and the Sketch Book of Washington Irving (pictured above right). We must admit that our present-day celebration of Christmas is greatly affected by these works. The only thing that may be said in favor of these well-written books is that they do contain interesting stories upholding a spirit of goodwill to men and of generosity to the poor. Christ the Savior and the King of Kings is, indeed, very remote in the background. The unfortunate zeal of the Puritans has undoubtedly influenced the American celebration of Christmas. It is very difficult in our day to realize that Christmas was outlawed in New England until the second half of the last (19th) century. As late as 1870, classes were held in the public schools of Boston on Christmas day, and any truant pupil was gravely punished or even publicly dismissed from school. Through the influx of German, Irish and French immigrants, together with the multiple immigration from all the European nations, Christmas has been more fully restored within the last seventy years in this country. Two currents are now manifest: the pagan, good-natured humanitarian sort of celebration represented upon Christmas cards by sleigh bells, Santa Claus, peppermint sticks and the like; and the Christian spiritual and traditional customs originating from medieval Christian Europe. Given the objective principles found in the liturgy of Holy Mass, the Divine Office and the sacramentals, we shall try to outline certain ancient and modern customs which are truly Christian in the foundation and based upon Christian Doctrine and practice.

*True Christmas Spirit by Rev. Edward J. Sutfin,
Grail Publications, St. Meinrad, Indiana, 1955*