

The Advent Wreath, a venerable European tradition, can be a way to involve even very little children in learning about Christian preparation - not only for celebrating Our Lord's birth, but to make our hearts truly ready to receive Him.

The wreath's symbolism of the advent (coming) of Light into the world is clear. The gradual lighting of the four candles, one on each Sunday of the Advent season, combined with the liturgical colors of the candles (purple is the penitential color used during Advent and Lent; rose is a liturgical color used only on Gaudete Sunday in Advent and Laetare Sunday in Lent) help to symbolize not only our expectation and hope in Our Savior's first coming into the world, but also in his Second Coming as Judge at the end of the world.

The wreath itself is also symbolic. The circle of evergreen in which the candles are placed represents everlasting life. The seedpods, nuts and cones used to decorate the wreath are symbolic of resurrection, and fruits represent the nourishing fruitfulness of the Christian life.

Gathering materials for the wreath-perhaps on an outing in the park or woods, or even in the backyard- and assembling it at home is an interesting family project in which even the youngest children can participate.

On the first Sunday of Advent, you may sprinkle the wreath with holy water and bless it before the first purple candle is lit. The appropriate Advent collect can be said as the candle[s] are lit each day of the week, followed by the blessing before meals, if you use the wreath at mealtime. The second Sunday two purple candles are lit; the third Sunday, two purple and one rose; and all candles are lit on the fourth Sunday.

Children who are old enough can take turns lighting the candles. (The littlest ones can blow them out at the end of the meal.) If you use the wreath at mealtime, it is helpful to place it on a tray or platter so it can be moved, and to protect the table from candle wax.

On Christmas Day, all the greens and decorations are replaced with fresh ones, and four new white candles, symbolizing Christ, replace the colored ones and are burned throughout the Christmas season. The Advent season is a good time to pray the Angelus at family meals.