

CONGREGATION FOR DIVINE WORSHIP  
AND THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS

*DIRECTORY*  
*ON POPULAR PIETY AND THE LITURGY*

**PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES**

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**In Advent**

96. Advent is a time of waiting, conversion and of hope:

- waiting-memory of the first, humble coming of the Lord in our mortal flesh; waiting-supplication for his final, glorious coming as Lord of History and universal Judge;
- conversion, to which the Liturgy at this time often refers quoting the prophets, especially John the Baptist, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 3,2);
- joyful hope that the salvation already accomplished by Christ (cf. Rm 8, 24-25) and the reality of grace in the world, will mature and reach their fullness, thereby granting us what is promised by faith, and "we shall become like him for we shall see him as he really is" (John 3,2).

97. Popular piety is particularly sensitive to Advent, especially when seen as the memory of the preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Christian people are deeply conscious of the long period of expectation that preceded the birth of our Savior. The faithful know that God sustained Israel's hope in the coming of the Messiah by the prophets.

Popular piety is not unaware of this extraordinary event. Indeed, it is awestruck at the prospect of the God of glory taking flesh in the womb of the humble and lowly Virgin Mary. The faithful are particularly sensitive to the difficulties faced by the Virgin Mary during her pregnancy, and are deeply moved by the fact that there was no room at the inn for Joseph and Mary, just as she was about to give birth to the Christ child (cf Lk 2,7).

Various expressions of popular piety connected with Advent have emerged throughout the centuries. These have sustained the faith of the people, and from one

generation to the next, they have conserved many valuable aspects of the liturgical season of Advent.

### *The Advent Wreath*

98. Placing four candles on green fronds has become a symbol of Advent in many Christian home, especially in the Germanic countries and in North America.

The Advent wreath, with the progressive lighting of its four candles, Sunday after Sunday, until the Solemnity of Christmas, is a recollection of the various stages of salvation history prior to Christ's coming and a symbol of the prophetic light gradually illuminating the long night prior to the rising of the Sun of justice (cf. Mt 3,20; Lk 1,78).

### *Advent processions*

99. In many regions, various kinds of processions are held in Advent, publicly to announce the imminent birth of the Savior (the "day star" in some Italian processions), or to represent the journey to Bethlehem of Joseph and Mary and their search for a place in which Jesus would be born (the *posadas* in the Hispanic and Latin American tradition).

### *The Winter Interstice*

100. Advent is celebrated during the Winter interstice in the northern hemisphere. This indicates a change of seasons and a moment of rest in many spheres of human endeavor. Popular piety is extremely sensitive to the vital cycle of nature. While the Winter interstice is celebrated, the seed lays in the ground waiting for the light and heat of the sun, which begins its ascent with the Winter solstice, and eventually causes it to germinate.

In those areas where popular piety has given rise to the celebration of the changing season, such expressions should be conserved and used as a time to pray the Lord, to reflect on the meaning of human work, which is a collaboration with the creative work of God, a self-realization of the person, service to the common good, and an actualization of the plan of redemption (114).

### *The Blessed Virgin Mary and Advent*

The Liturgy frequently celebrates the Blessed Virgin Mary in an exemplary way during the season of Advent (115). It recalls the women of the Old Testament who prefigured and prophesied her mission; it exalts her faith and the humility with which

she promptly and totally submitted to God's plan of salvation; it highlights her presence in the events of grace preceding the birth of the Savior. Popular piety also devotes particular attention to the Blessed Virgin Mary during Advent, as is evident from the many pious exercises practiced at this time, especially the novena of the Immaculate Conception and of Christmas.

However, the significance of Advent, "that time which is particularly apt for the cult of the Mother of God"(116), is such that it cannot be represented merely as a "Marian month".

In the calendars of the Oriental Churches, the period of preparation for the celebration of the manifestation (Advent) of divine salvation (Theophany) in the mysteries of Christmas-Epiphany of the Only Son of God, is markedly Marian in character. Attention is concentrated on preparation for the Lord's coming in the *Deipara*. For the Orientals, all Marian mysteries are Christological mysteries since they refer to the mystery of our salvation in Christ. In the Coptic rite, the Lauds of the Virgin Mary are sung in the *Theotokia*. Among the Syrians, Advent is referred to as the *Subbara* or Annunciation, so as to highlight its Marian character. The Byzantine Rite prepares for Christmas with a whole series of Marian feasts and rituals.

102. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which is profoundly influential among the faithful, is an occasion for many displays of popular piety and especially for the novena of the Immaculate Conception. There can be no doubt that the feast of the pure and sinless Conception of the Virgin Mary, which is a fundamental preparation for the Lord's coming into the world, harmonizes perfectly with many of the salient themes of Advent. This feast also makes reference to the long messianic waiting for the Savior's birth and recalls events and prophecies from the Old Testament, which are also used in the Liturgy of Advent.

The novena of the Immaculate Conception, wherever it is celebrated, should highlight the prophetic texts which begin with Genesis 3,15, and end in Gabriel's salutation of the one who is "full of grace" (Lk 1, 31-33).

The approach of Christmas is celebrated throughout the American continent with many displays of popular piety, centered on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe (12 December), which disposes the faithful to receive the Savior at his birth. Mary, who was "intimately united with the birth of the Church in America, became the radiant Star illuminating the proclamation of Christ the Savior to the sons of these nations"(117).

*The Christmas Novena*

103. The Christmas novena began as a means of communicating the riches of the Liturgy to the faithful who were unable easily to grasp it. It has played a very effective role and can continue to play such a role. At the same time, in current conditions where the faithful have easier access to the Liturgy, it would seem desirable that vespers from the 17-23 of December should be more solemn by adopting the use of the "major antiphons", and by inviting the faithful to participate at the celebration. Such a celebration, held either before or after which the popular devotions to which the faithful are particularly attached, would be an ideal "Christmas novena", in full conformity with the Liturgy and mindful of the needs of the faithful. Some elements, such as the homily, the use of incense, and the intercessions, could also be expanded within the celebration of Vespers.

### *The Crib*

104. As is well known, in addition to the representations of the crib found in churches since antiquity, the custom of building cribs in the home was widely promoted from the thirteenth century, influenced undoubtedly by St. Francis of Assisi's crib in Greccio. Their preparation, in which children play a significant role, is an occasion for the members of the family to come into contact with the mystery of Christmas, as they gather for a moment of prayer or to read the biblical accounts of the Lord's birth.

### *Popular piety and the spirit of Advent*

105. Popular piety, because of its intuitive understanding of the Christian mystery, can contribute effectively to the conservation of many of the values of Advent, which are not infrequently threatened by the commercialization of Christmas and consumer superficiality.

Popular piety perceives that it is impossible to celebrate the Lord's birth except in an atmosphere of sobriety and joyous simplicity and of concern for the poor and emarginated. The expectation of the Lord's birth makes us sensitive to the value of life and the duties to respect and defend it from conception. Popular piety intuitively understands that it is not possible coherently to celebrate the birth of him "who saves his people from their sins" without some effort to overcome sin in one's own life, while waiting vigilantly for Him who will return at the end of time.