

Grace Notes in Miniature

Friday, December 4th, 2020

Dear Friends:

There is a fair amount of poignancy as I light my Advent wreath this year. This has always been a family event, done at dinnertime, and although I am still enjoying its warmth and light, it does feel odd to be doing it alone. The Advent wreath tradition started in the homes of German Lutherans about four hundred years ago and has grown to be a part of many Christian traditions both in worship settings and in people's homes. As Catholics we are used to the arrangement of candles - three purple and one pink - which echo the liturgical colours of our vestments and draperies; however, in Protestant churches red or white candles are often used. In Eastern Rite and Orthodox churches, the wreath may contain six different coloured candles (green, blue, gold, white, purple and red, symbolising faith, hope, love, peace, repentance and communion) as they follow a six-week fast prior to Christmas. A German pastor, Johann Hinrich Wichern, is credited with the creation of the modern Advent wreath: he made a ring of candles on



a cartwheel, with red candles for the days of the week and white candles for the Sundays. These were lit to track the days, much as we would use an Advent calendar today. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OkQVGu6McTE>

Various traditions identify the candles as hope, peace, joy and love, or the Messiah (prophecy), Bethlehem (Mary and Joseph), shepherds' and angel's candles. In the United Kingdom, they are named to relate to the readings of the Common Lectionary as: the hope of all God's people (week one), the Old Testament prophets (week two), John the Baptist (week three) and Mary the mother of Jesus (week four).¹

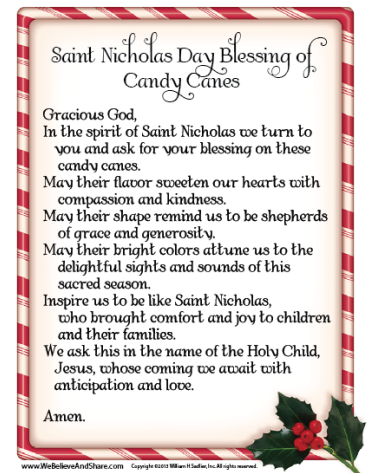
Wreaths of candles are also part of the celebration of St Lucy's -Lucia's- Day on December 13th, when a young woman clad in white and crowned with a wreath of candles helps us prepare for the Light of the World - Christ - coming to us on Christmas Day. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEKXFVG26nA> In Scandinavian countries, in the Julian calendar, St Lucy's Day fell around Solstice, recognised as the shortest - darkest the year.



Winter
- day of

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Advent_wreath

Many special saints' days and observances occur in Advent. This week we had the memorials of St Francis Xavier and St John Damascene; this Sunday is the Feast of St Nicholas, celebrated in many countries as the day on which children receive toys and sweets; on December 7th we remember St Ambrose, one of the Doctors of the Church; and, on December 8th, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This last recognises the Catholic dogma that Mary, herself, was conceived without sin by her mother, so



that she in turn would be a fitting mother to Jesus, the Christ Child; people often confuse these two doctrines and it may help to remember that Mary is often referred to as “the Immaculate Conception” referring << Virgo by Josef Moroder-Lusenberg) to her state at birth and not to her motherhood. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UI7CLPd14JQ> On December 9th we recognise St Juan Diego whose encounter with the Blessed Virgin gave us Our Lady of Guadalupe (December 12th); our Lady of Loreto is celebrated on December 10th, and St Lucy on December 13th.

There are many delightful traditions around the world – from the Irish practice of putting a candle in the window to let the Holy Family know that they are welcome there, to the Posado in Mexico where people process through the streets trying to find Mary and Joseph a place to stay. Nativity scenes or crèches – believed to have been introduced by St Francis of Assisi – are popular in France and Italy, and community nativity plays in parts of Spain. Here at home, some have begun the “reverse” Advent calendar where one does a good deed or makes a donation when opening the doors on the calendar. Many children (and young at heart) are very glad that the penitential season of Advent for us does not require giving up chocolate!



Lord Jesus,
Master of both the light and the darkness, send your Holy Spirit upon our preparations for Christmas. We who have so much to do and seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day, We who are anxious over many things look forward to your coming among us. We who are blessed in so many ways long for the complete joy of your kingdom. We whose hearts are heavy seek the joy of your presence. We are your people, walking in darkness, yet seeking the light. To you we say, "Come Lord Jesus!" Amen.
- Henri J.M. Nouwen

With every blessing,
Gillian