

A celebration of light

THE ADVENT WREATH



BLESSINGS AND PRAYERS
FOR
FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Introduction

"The people who walked in darkness / have seen a great light. . . ." (Isaiah 9:1).

Our lives are an "advent," a "coming" from our time to the time of God. We live our advents in the eternal hope and expectation of the ever-burning light of God's risen One, the perfect Light who shatters the darkness of sin and alienation.

The Advent wreath originated from the custom of German and northern European communities of fashioning wreaths or "wheels" of candles to light their homes during the cold, dark days of winter. By the nineteenth century, the Advent wreath had become the devotion we know today. In our own busy whirl of shopping, decorating, cooking, and celebrating during the holiday season, the *Advent wreath* is a beautiful and simple ritual for our families and communities to keep the real meaning of Christmas before us.

The *four candles* of the Advent wreath represent the four weeks of Advent and the thousands of years that the people of God awaited the promised Messiah. The candles are *purple*, the liturgical color of penance and prayer that marks the Advent season (one of the candles may be rose for the Third Sunday of Advent, traditionally known as "Gaudete Sunday" from the opening words of that Sunday's liturgy: "Rejoice in the Lord always"). Each week, one candle is lighted until all four are aglow on the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

The *round wreath* itself symbolizes the eternity of God and the Father's presence throughout human history. *Evergreen* branches are often used in decorating the wreath, reminders of the eternal life of God in Christ.

An Advent wreath can be elaborately decorated with evergreen branches, winter berries, ribbons, and pinecones—or be as simple as four candles placed in the center of your family table. Many religious goods stores sell ready-made Advent wreaths.

To fully appreciate the meaning of the Advent wreath, a sense of family and community should be part of the lighting: for example, older children

might make the wreath. The weekly lighting could take place before or after the family attends Mass together, at dinner on Sunday, or at some other time when the family is together. Family members could also take turns lighting the candles, offering the prayers, and reading the passages from Scripture.

This leaflet has been prepared as a guide to the weekly lighting. The readings and prayers listed here follow the weekly themes of the lectionary readings for the Sundays of Advent: the return of Christ at the end of time (First Sunday), the ministry of John the Baptist (Second Sunday), the joyful anticipation of the Messiah's coming (Third Sunday), and the events leading up to Jesus' birth (Fourth Sunday). Readings and prayers may be added or changed to make the candle lighting a daily family ritual as well as a weekly celebration. Christmas songs and carols, poems, or other readings may also be incorporated to make the Advent wreath a more personal and meaningful prayer for your family.

As laid out in this leaflet, the lighting of the Advent wreath takes the following form:

A family member lights the candle or candles and recites the first part of the opening scriptural verse, with the whole family reciting the second part.

Following the reading from Scripture, all pause for a moment of reflection (note that additional readings are included for those who light the candles more than once a week).

The leader offers the petitions and all join in the responses. Invited by the leader, all recite the Lord's Prayer together. The final prayer is offered by the leader.

A special blessing for each candle concludes the lighting. If the Advent wreath lighting takes place before a meal, grace might be prayed at the conclusion.

Parents of young children might wish to simplify the prayers and select the readings from a children's Bible or lectionary.

For Christmas Eve and Day, the purple candles may be replaced with white candles, or a white candle may be kept in the center of the wreath throughout Advent for Christmas Eve/Day.