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ADVENT

Daylight grows shorter. The dark of night grows longer and more intense. In this cold dark, with some first signs of snow in the north, lights begin to shine. They were not there before. They are on trees and in windows. It is as if people are afraid of the dark and all it symbolizes.

A spirit of expectation begins to pick up momentum: shopping trips, gift wrapping, parties, a different kind of music and song, and an avalanche of decorations. It is obvious that something wonderful is about to happen.

In the midst of this swelling excitement throughout contemporary society and culture, worshippers in churches are reminded to be watchful, to repent, to do penance. This gospel message parallels a secular song heard occasionally during this time of the year: "You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout, I'm telling you why: _____ is coming to town!"

Purple inside churches clashes with red, green, and sparkling silver and gold everywhere else. Young and old alike prepare to celebrate Christmas by taking part in a great variety of traditions, some of them only remotely associated with preparation for the Christian mystery of the Messiah's birth.

Yes, someone "is coming to town." Prepare the way of the Lord!

Beginning of Church Year

Advent, with its many emotional overtones, ushers in the most popular season of the year. At first, from the early 4th century, the feast of the Nativity on December 25 began the church year at Rome. When Advent evolved, it took this position, and since the 900s has been considered the beginning of the church year. This does not mean that Advent is the most important time of the year. The Easter cycle has always had this honor. The distinction happened from the practice of placing the liturgical texts for Advent at the beginning of hand-copied books used for Mass. They had to begin somewhere.

The beginning of Advent always falls on the Sunday nearest the feast of St. Andrew the Apostle, November 30. As a preparation season, like Lent, it has no meaning in itself. It looks forward to the annual celebration of Jesus' birth, both the historical event itself and the saving event of the coming of God in flesh.

Theme

Advent has always been somewhat confused. It blends together a penitential spirit very similar to Lent, a liturgical theme of preparation for the Second and Final Coming of the Lord, called the Parousia, and a joyful theme of getting ready for the Bethlehem event. Religious traditions associated with Advent give expression to all these themes.

The word Advent (Latin *adventus*, "coming") originally described the whole mystery of the Incarnation. The conception of Jesus was an Advent, but so was his birth and what will be his final coming at the endtimes. In a more popular sense, Advent was first associated with the time of the year now called Christmastime and finally with the weeks of preparation for Christmas.

Origin

Once Christmas had become a popular feast throughout the church after the 4th century, it did not take long for Advent to evolve as a distinct liturgical season. In ancient times, people tended to precede a time of feasting with a time of fasting. There are hints of a penitential season at this time of the year in the late 5th century in Spain and especially in Gaul (roughly, today's France and the Lowlands). These parts of Europe had close links to the Eastern church, which celebrated its main Nativity feast on January 6, called Epiphany. They approached this feast with forty days of fasting and penance, very similar to Lent, possibly because Epiphany had taken on a baptismal theme just as was true of the Easter Vigil. Among those people Saturdays and Sundays were excluded from fasting, just as they were during Lent. In Gaul, to maintain forty days of fasting, Advent began on November 11, the feast of St. Martin. There, at one time, Advent was known as St. Martin's Lent.

The season of Advent as we know it probably had a different origin. By the mid-6th century, the church in Rome had begun to focus on the December Ember Days that occurred on the Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday after the feast of St. Lucy (December 13). These days, a week before the Nativity on December 25, had a distinct

penitential theme. The reason lay in a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia, from December 17-23. On December 17, sacrifice was offered to Saturn, god of agriculture. The days following were filled with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. It seems that the church tried to offset the influence of this popular pagan festival with days of fasting, prayer, and penance as it looked ahead to the feast of Nativity on December 25.

There is evidence for this short "Advent" coinciding with the pagan Saturnalia. There is an ancient tradition of singing the O Antiphons during the Liturgy of Hours on precisely the same days as the pagan Saturnalia. The singing of these O Antiphons, always an Advent tradition, is still popular today, and they have become the Alleluia verses for December 17-23:

(O <i>Sapientia</i>)	Come, Wisdom of our God...
(O <i>Adonai</i>)	Come, Leader of Ancient Israel...
(O <i>Radix Jesse</i>)	Come, Flower of Jesse's Stem...
(O <i>Clavis David</i>)	Come, Key of David...
(O <i>Oriens</i>)	Come, Radiant Dawn...
(O <i>Rex Gentium</i>)	Come, King of all Nations...
(O <i>Emmanuel</i>)	Come, Emmanuel...

By the end of the 6th century, during the reign of Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), a short preparation season of four weeks had evolved in the Roman church. Sunday themes looked ahead to the joyful remembering of Jesus' birth on December 25. The penitential theme, popular generations before, faded.

Penitential Theme

Historical conditions in both the church and among emerging peoples in western Europe finally determined the length and spirit of the season of Advent. In Gaul an Advent theme, separate from that of Rome, evolved under the influence of missionaries from Ireland. They promoted a penitential spirit, emphasizing not Jesus' first coming in the Incarnation, but rather his final coming in judgment at the endtimes. Purple was used for vestments, and the Alleluia and Glory to God were omitted from the Mass.

The evolution of Advent was also influenced by traditions in the monasteries of Gaul. In 567, a synod at Tours, France, clarified the monastic practice of fasting on all Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, with a greater intensity during Lent, the week following

Pentecost, and the month of December up to Christmas. Fifteen years later this same tradition of fasting was ordered for the laity from the Feast of St. Martin (November 11) until Christmas.

Mixed Theme

An accident of history contributed to the final development of the season of Advent as we know it today. For years some outlying churches in the Frankish territory of Gaul had begun to use liturgical books from Rome. These had probably traveled northward across the Alps with monks and pilgrims impressed with the way things were done in Rome.

Carolingian rulers set in motion a Romanizing process in their kingdom for both political and religious reasons. In 754, Pepin, the predecessor of Charlemagne, was crowned king of the Frankish territory by Pope Stephen. In honor of the occasion Pepin ordered that the liturgical books used throughout his kingdom be replaced by those from Rome. As a result, the shorter and non-penitential Roman Advent began to spread throughout Gaul. Because the books from Rome had to be copied by hand, there was a long period of time when a mixture of liturgies was common. Some of the penitential themes of Advent in the north were mixed with the more joyful themes of the shorter Advent from Rome.

Charlemagne, who, like his father was impressed with everything Roman, continued the effort. He borrowed books from Rome for his library in Aachen. There they served as models for copying. The books he borrowed, unfortunately, described the elaborate papal liturgy rather than that of ordinary Roman parish churches. Charlemagne's advisor, Alcuin, designed substitutes for missing parts with the king's authority. The end result was a continuation of a mixture, neither Frankish nor Roman.

In the 10th century, the church in Rome suffered a serious decline and a period of chaos because of abuses in leadership. Clergy and people lost interest in the liturgical life of the church. Only the new cluniac monasteries were able to keep alive a religious spirit associated with the church's worship. Eventually, at the end of the 10th century under orders from the Roman emperors Otto I, II, and III, the church of Rome began to reform its weakened liturgical practices by borrowing liturgical books from monastic centers up north.

The liturgical books that had traveled northward hundreds of years before were not the same as those that returned. The new liturgy, however, was soon considered authentically Roman. Eventually, it

became the liturgy of the whole medieval Latin church. In this way, an Advent of four weeks, with a confused theme of penance and joy, eventually spread from Rome to the universal church.

The somber theme that colors the first Sundays of Advent is a fitting continuation of the themes of Sundays immediately preceding Advent and concluding the church year. On these Sundays there is an emphasis on the endtimes and the consummation of all history. The First Sunday of Advent continues this emphasis. Then, on the Second and Third Sundays of Advent, John the Baptist, the Advent prophet, issues a call to penance. On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the Incarnational theme finally begins to unfold with the account of the Annunciation.

A penitential theme during Advent was more evident until recent times. A tradition of fasting continued until the Code of Canon Law of 1917-1918. Musical instruments were discouraged during Mass, the color purple was used in vestments and decorations, the Glory to God was dropped but the Alleluia kept, and weddings were prohibited. With some modifications these traditions continue today but without a serious penitential spirit.

Some religious traditions during the month of December are directly associated with the themes of Advent. Others are already part of the celebration of Christmas but are anticipated during the weeks of Advent.

Advent Wreath

Advent traditions reflect a spirit of expectation and, therefore, unfold gradually. Probably the most popular tradition today is the lighting of candles on an Advent Wreath in both churches and homes. This custom originated among Lutherans in Germany in the 16th century and quickly became popular in other areas. Along with the Christmas tree, it is probably an example of Christianizing practices popular from pre-Christian times. There had always been a festival of burning special lights and fire at the end of November and beginning of December in Germanic lands as the darkness of winter becomes more severe. This tradition continued into modern times. In the 1500s, it took on a distinct Christian symbolism as the Advent Wreath, first among Lutherans in eastern Germany and then among all German Protestants and Catholics. This tradition came to America with German immigrants. It was popularized among Catholics with the liturgical movement in the mid-1900s.

The Advent Wreath, which may be of any size, is made of ever-

greens and is placed on a table or suspended from the ceiling. There are four candles, one for each week of Advent. The color of the candles is not an essential factor because the symbolism is primarily in the flame. It is popular, however, that three of them be violet or purple, the traditional color of Advent. One is rose, the traditional color of the Third Sunday of Advent, originally called *Gaudete* ("Rejoice") Sunday from the first word of the entrance antiphon for Mass.

After the wreath is blessed on the first Sunday of Advent, a prayer is prayed and a candle lit. This ceremony repeats on each of the following three Sundays. Light increases, pushing out darkness, with another candle lit until all four are burning.

Wreaths have always been symbolic of victory and glory. The basic symbolism of the Advent Wreath goes beyond this. It lies in the tension between darkness and light. It represents the long time when people lived in spiritual darkness, waiting for the coming of the Messiah, the light of the world. Each year in Advent people wait once again in darkness for the coming of the Lord, his historical coming in the mystery of Bethlehem, his final coming at the end of time, and his special coming in every moment of grace.

Jesse Tree

Biblical persons associated with the gradual coming of the Messiah are represented by the Advent tradition of the Jesse Tree, named after the father of David. Symbols are gradually added to the tree or branch. These symbols can be drawn, cut out, found, or purchased. They represent ancestors of Jesus, either in faith or bloodline, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesse, David, Solomon, Joseph, and Mary.

Advent House

A popular variation of the Jesse Tree is the Advent, or Christmas, House, usually purchased in a religious goods store. One of many windows is opened each day to display still another feature of the coming of Jesus. On December 24 the door is opened, revealing the Nativity scene.

Advent Calendar

The four weeks before Christmas can be designed into a special Advent calendar of personal preparation. The days are marked with goals toward personal conversion or service to be done for others.

Manger

An Advent tradition that combines a spirit of conversion and the coming of Jesus is the practice of having children prepare the manger for the family Nativity scene. Each night, children are invited to place in the manger one piece of straw for each good deed done that day.

Advent Colors

The traditional color of Advent is purple or violet. It symbolizes a penitential spirit that has been associated with this season. Liturgists and other church leaders have begun clarifying the theme of Advent, emphasizing that it has its own distinct theme and is not a "little Lent." Some liturgists have promoted a new, or renewed, Advent color: a dark blue. While at first a little shocking to parishioners, this color has foundation in the evolution of Advent. In northern European countries and England there was a tradition to use for Advent a shade of violet different from that used for Lent. It tended more toward dark blue because of the kind of dye used. This color seems proper also because of the role of Mary in the mystery of the Christmas event.

Traditionally on the third Sunday of Advent, rose-colored vestments have been used. This color anticipates and is symbolic of the Christmas joy announced in the first word of the Entrance Antiphon: "Rejoice" (Latin, *Gaudete*).

CHRISTMAS

Beginning earlier and earlier each year, now before Thanksgiving, a Christmas mood begins to appear everywhere. Decorations of artificial snow, candles, and red and green wreaths cover street lights and are evident in every public display area. Elaborately decorated and lighted Christmas trees can be seen through windows of homes. The outsides of houses and trees in the yard are also decorated with bright lights. Music and song tell of Christmas cheer mixed with the Bethlehem story and cartoon characters. Stores are filled with shoppers. Little children write letters to Santa Claus and dream of presents under the tree.

This saturation of cheer and good will seems at first to contradict the Christian mystery that is still unfolding in churches. Parish Advent liturgies continue to develop a prophetic theme of preparation: a waiting for the final coming of the Lord at the end of time and a call to conversion. While these themes unfold, most families are involved in the hectic pace of Christmas preparations, often centered around decorating and making or purchasing gifts for family and friends.

Christmas, therefore, is no longer just a Christian liturgical feast. Over the centuries it has become a seasonal mood, not limited to believers who prepare for and rejoice over the birth of Jesus. Almost every aspect of society celebrates the season in some way. Jews celebrate their ancient Feast of Lights, or Hanukkah, about the same time. Non-believers participate fully in secular expressions of cheer and good will. The commercial world promotes the season for financial profit in such a persuasive way that Christian movements counter with organized efforts to "put Christ back into Christmas."

Despite the secular overtones of the season, the word "Christmas" underscores its profound Christian and spiritual significance. It has been used in English-speaking countries since the Middle Ages; the word was derived from the Old English *Cristes Maesse*, or "Mass of Christ." Over the centuries it has become a comprehensive word. It

includes religious traditions which celebrate the history-shaking mystery of God coming to live among human creatures: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory: The glory of an only Son coming from the Father, filled with enduring love" (John 1:14). It also includes all the secular traditions associated with the season.

With the Father's gift of Jesus as a model, Christmas also celebrates the mystery of giving—and receiving—both with and without Christian faith. Finally, Christmas incorporates numerous pre-Christian traditions concerning the winter solstice along with the legends of St. Nicholas that gave rise to the modern creation of Santa Claus.

Origin of Christmas

The primitive church seems to have had little or no interest in the actual date or circumstances of Jesus' birth. A higher priority was their expectation of an immediate consummation of history and a final coming of Christ. They celebrated the mystery of his resurrection weekly and annually a few hundred years before a tradition of commemorating his birth became popular. Martyrs and saints were honored with annual anniversary festivals before the anniversary of the Lord's birth became a tradition. Eventually, the church's desire to live out liturgically the entire Christ mystery led to a Nativity festival. Another possible reason is the church's response to the influence of early heresies, especially Docetism, that denied the human nature of Jesus.

The actual date of Christ's birth is unknown. The gospels do not record it, nor is there any early tradition to identify it. Modern scholarship identifies only the approximate year, probably 8-6 B.C.E. with adjustments to our modern calendar taken into consideration. There are two traditional dates: December 25 in the Western church and January 6 in the Eastern church. Both have been celebrated by the church as memorials of Jesus' birth, the latter becoming the feast of Epiphany. Neither of them, however, is recognized as the actual date today.

Date of Christmas

Rome had a Nativity festival by 336 and probably a generation or so earlier. There is still disagreement among scholars concerning the reason why these early Christians of the late 3rd and early 4th century chose to celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25. Theories, still popular today, are based on three tendencies of the early Christians: their high

respect for symbolism, their natural tendency to borrow from the real world around them, and their attempts to offset the influence of pagan festivals.

Earthy symbolism is very powerful at this time of the year in the northern hemisphere. Each year Christians, along with the general population, noticed that beginning with the fall equinox, the darkness of night began creeping up on daylight as days became shorter and nights longer. At the winter solstice this situation changed and the light of day began once again to defeat the darkness of night. The winter solstice occurred on December 25 on the Julian calendar and became the popular date for Christmas. As noted in the origin of Advent, a five-day pagan harvest festival of Saturnalia devoted to Saturn, the god of agriculture, occurred shortly before the winter solstice. It was celebrated with gift exchanges, feasting, and excesses. Did Christians turn their hearts to the mystery of Christ's birth to offset this pagan celebration?

Non-Christian Influence

Mithraism, a pagan sun cult popular in the Roman Empire during primitive Christianity, promoted this natural symbolism. Devotees of Mithra, a Persian deity, celebrated the birthday of their sun god with a festival called *dies natalis Solis Invicti* (Latin, "birthday of the unconquered sun") at the winter solstice. In 274, Emperor Aurelian proclaimed this Sun god the principal divine patron of the Roman Empire. He promulgated the feast throughout the empire in an effort to promote unity by way of a uniform religious monotheism.

This sun cult, or mystery religion, became a threat to Christianity. The two religions shared some religious discipline, doctrine, and symbolism in common, such as initiation, fasting, immersion, a sacred meal of bread and wine mixed with water and honey for new initiates, fellowship gestures, and belief in the immortality of the soul. One theory is that Christians began to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25 when this festival of the sun became popular in Rome. Christianity would have been comfortable with the symbolism because its own gospel speaks of light, or sun, as a symbol for the presence and meaning of Christ. The adoption of this date for the birthday of Jesus would have challenged people to turn from adoration of the material sun to adoration of Christ, the truly unconquered light of the world (John 8:12).

With the promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313, Constantine became the benefactor and protector of Christianity. Consequently,

pagan cultural features of sun-symbolism were no longer threatening. They could be freely absorbed by the church. The church, with its Nativity date of December 25 already in place, did precisely this. It promoted comparisons between the birth of Jesus and the winter solstice.

Once the December 25 date became popular, efforts were made to argue that it was the historical birthday of Jesus. These arguments were based on assumptions surrounding gospel events rather than on historical evidence. They do, however, take into account a growing preoccupation with the solar year and the cycle of seasons. The main assumption is that Zechariah the priest was ministering in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, which falls approximately on September 25 (fall equinox). His son, John the Baptist, would have been born on June 24 (summer solstice): "Your wife Elizabeth shall bear a son whom you shall name John" (Luke 1:1-25). Jesus would then have been conceived on March 25 (spring equinox) and born nine months later on December 25 (winter solstice): "Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son in her old age; she who was thought to be sterile is now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:26-38).

Popularity of Christmas

Regardless of the actual reasons for the choice of the December 25 date, a Nativity festival quickly became popular. By the 5th century it marked the beginning of the church year. Later, when the preparation season of Advent received a definite shape after the 900s, it replaced Christmas as the beginning of the church year.

During the Middle Ages, Christmas exploded in popularity. So did religious traditions associated with it. Christmas competed with the more important celebration of the Paschal Mystery at Easter, and in popular practice began to outshine it. New peoples from the barbarian tribes of Europe took to the feast wholeheartedly. They added elements from their own pre-Christian winter traditions, putting their stamp on Christmas traditions that continue today.

In the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation in some countries challenged the excessive celebration of Christmas, since much of it was not at all connected directly with the mystery of Jesus' birth. Puritans in England, for example, condemned all celebration of Christmas as pagan. After they came to political power, they outlawed through Parliament in 1643 any observance of Christmas (along with Easter, Pentecost, and saints' days) under pain of punish-

Reindeer. Some popular Christmas traditions are considered religious but are only indirectly so. They reflect a Christianization of pre-Christian customs, especially traditions related to the winter solstice and the symbolism of light and dark in the northern hemisphere. This is the case with Christmas trees and Christmas lights of all shapes, sizes, and colors. Other Christmas traditions, for example Christmas liturgies and Nativity scenes, are strictly religious in nature. They are associated with the historical birth of Jesus and the mystery of the Incarnation. Finally, there are traditions associated with the veneration of saints during this time of the year, especially St. Nicholas on December 6. Even this bishop received a secular reincarnation in the evolution of Santa Claus.

Christmas Candle

The most obvious feature of the Christmas season is the popularity of special lights. At one time, all lights were burning flames in the form of wicks and candles and have always been popular religious symbols. The religious use of a special candle, called the Christmas Candle, is an ancient tradition. Some place it in the middle of the Advent Wreath, whose symbolism is now completed with the coming of Christ: The light has succeeded in pushing away the darkness of sin and religious ignorance. Others place it in some obvious place in the home. Originally it was a huge candle burned along with a Yule log, representing the light of Christ that came into the world during this season.

Window Lights

Other forms of Christmas lights are also popular during this festive season. The custom of putting a candle in the window comes from 19th-century Irish immigrants. It, too, seems to have had its origin in the Yule candle. It represents a beacon to light the way for Mary and Joseph and the coming of the Christ Child. It is possible, however, that its origin lies in a time of suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. The candles attracted fugitive priests to safe houses. This Christmas tradition spread throughout the country after being popularized by carolers in Boston a century ago.

Luminaries

In the Southwest there is a custom among Hispanics of placing luminaries, or burning candles, in paper sacks filled with sand. These decorate sidewalks and fronts of homes. This tradition has spread to non-

Hispanic areas throughout the country. Luminaries symbolically light the way for the Christ child.

Hanukkah

The Jewish Festival of Lights, Hanukkah ("dedication"), fits into the atmosphere of this season. It begins on the 25th day of the lunar month of Kislev, usually falling in December. The festivities continue for a full week with a growing crescendo of light: an additional candle is lit each night on a seven-branched menorah from one main candle until all are burning. This ritual is accompanied by singing Psalm 13, playing games, and offering gifts.

This Jewish festival of lights commemorates the saving of the Jewish faith in 165 B.C.E. Under the leadership of Judas Maccabee, a small Jewish guerrilla army defeated a much greater Syrian military force that had tried to destroy Judaism. After the victory the Temple in Jerusalem was purified of pagan profanation and rededicated. The Syrian king, Antiochus the Great, had dedicated the Temple to the Greek god Zeus, with statues to this deity and himself. Jewish monotheism was saved through this victory and rededication. From this monotheism, Christianity and, later, Islam would be born.

Kwanzaa

Another festival that begins on Dec. 21 and fits into the broad Christmas atmosphere is the relatively new African-American celebration of Kwanzaa. It evolved in 1966 under the influence of Maulana Ron Karenga, an American graduate student, in the wake of the Watts riots.

Kwanzaa, ("first fruits" in Swahili) has seven principles: Unity, Self-determination, Collective Work and Responsibility, Cooperative Economics, Purpose, Creativity, and Faith. These principles are symbolized by straw mat, candle holder, ears of corn, gifts, unity cup, flag of the black nation, and the seven candles of Rindra.

Nativity Scene

The tradition of having some kind of Nativity scene, also known by its French name (*crèche*), in churches and homes evolved during the Middle Ages, first in churches as a prop for Nativity plays associated with Mass. A *crèche* is a reproduction of the cave in Bethlehem with the principal characters: Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus in a manger, shepherds, angels, and animals. St. Francis of Assisi popularized this

custom with a living Nativity scene at Greccio, Italy, in 1223. These scenes, constructed from every sort of material, spread throughout Christendom.

Las Posadas

Among Hispanics it is popular to tell the story of Mary and Joseph's search for room in an inn by way of a ritual called *las Posadas*. A procession of families with "Mary" and "Joseph" approaches a designated home, the "inn," and sings out for a place for Mary who is pregnant. From inside the home the excuses of having no room is sung. This ritual is repeated on a series of nights until finally the "seekers" are invited in for a party.

Oplatek

Among people of Slavic ancestry and still today among many Poles in the United States, the father of the family solemnly breaks a Christmas wafer made of wheat flour, *oplatek* (Polish, "thin wafer"), on Christmas Eve. He distributes it to those present as a symbol of love and peace. These pieces are then shared with wishes for luck, health, and happiness. Pieces are also shared with friends and neighbors, a symbol of unity in the human family.

Christmas Tree

Next to the Nativity scene, the most popular Christmas tradition is to have a Christmas tree in the home. This custom is not the same as bringing a Yule tree or evergreens into the home, originally popular during the month of the winter solstice in Germany. The word "yule" seems to have come from the Anglo-Saxon *geol*, a word for feasting and drinking. The Yule tree reflected a longing for "green things" during the cold, dark winter. This tradition became so popular that "Yule" eventually became a substitute name for Christmas. The burning of a Yule log was adapted from an ancient Scandinavian practice of lighting bonfires in honor of the winter solstice.

Most Christmas traditions associated with evergreens and trees are related somehow to pre-Christian practices. The use of evergreens and wreaths as a symbol of life was popular already among the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews. Teutonic and Scandinavian peoples worshiped trees and decorated houses and barns with evergreens at the new year to scare away demons.

The Christmas tree, as did so many other Christmas traditions, originated in Germany. There it was first called the Paradise Tree. The

Christmas tree seems to have resulted from the combination of two traditions: a prop from a popular morality or mystery play of the Middle Ages with a festival of lights from pre-Christian times.

In the Middle Ages, traveling actors and troubadours visited villages and acted out popular Bible stories and morality plays in the village square or in the local church. One of these was a skit about Adam and Eve with a message promising that a Messiah would come. December 24 was observed as the feast of Adam and Eve. The prop of this skit was a Paradise Tree, a fir tree decorated with the traditional apple. Children were so delighted with this tree that parents were persuaded to have one in the home, especially when these plays were forbidden in churches because of abuses. The Paradise Tree, decorated with apples, other fruit, and pastries soon became a family tradition.

Another tradition was popular at the same time and place as the Paradise Tree. As the winter solstice approached, Germanic peoples celebrated a festival of lights as they had done ever since pre-Christian times centuries before. After their conversion these people re-interpreted the solstice lights, or candles, as symbolic of the light of the Messiah, Christ, shining in the darkness of sin and spiritual ignorance. These candles were placed each year on steps or shelves in the shape of a pyramid, decorated with evergreens and the Star of Bethlehem at the top. In the early 17th century, these two traditions seemed to have merged, probably out of convenience. The Christmas lights or burning candles and the Star of Bethlehem were attached to the Paradise Tree of the same shape as the Christmas pyramid. This gave rise in the land of the Germans to the Christmas tree.

The Christmas tree as a widespread tradition is relatively recent. By the beginning of the 19th century it had become popular throughout Germany and from there it spread to Slavic nations and France. Only in the mid-1800s was the custom introduced into England. About the same time, it was popularized in the United States by German immigrants. On a limited basis it had first been introduced in the American colonies by Hessian soldiers during the American Revolution, and even earlier by the German Moravian church.

At first, Christmas trees in this country were small table trees decorated with homemade ornaments from needlework, pastries, and ribbon. By the end of the last century, floor-to-ceiling trees were common, decorated with homemade and commercially manufactured decorations, and wrapped in tinsel garland. In the late 1930s the light-bulb-blowing process was adapted to Christmas tree balls.

Christmas trees appear in numerous forms today, including artifi-

cial ones. For many people they are merely a holiday decoration. They preserve, however, rich Christian symbolism: the green of hope at a time of dying, the burning light of Christ at a time of spiritual darkness, and the fruits of paradise.

Christmas Carols

Today, Christmas songs are usually called carols (Old English *carolen*, "to sing joyfully," which in turn came from the Greek *choraulein*, a ring dance with flutes). Originally, even in the 5th century, carols were Latin hymns. Christmas carols in a modern sense became popular in Italy in the 13th century under the influence of St. Francis of Assisi and spread throughout Europe. Carols sung today come from both Protestant and Catholic composers of recent centuries. French composers gave us "Angels We Have Heard on High," Germany, "Silent Night," "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming," and America, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." The tradition of going Christmas caroling was introduced in the American colonies by the English. Later, late in the 19th century, it was popularized in the Beacon Hill district of Boston. In St. Louis at the turn of the 20th century, carolers would sing at homes decorated with a candle in the window. Today this custom continues throughout the United States, often with groups paying special attention to shut-ins.

Mistletoe

What has become an occasion of affection and even merriment, a kiss under the mistletoe, was a serious tradition in pre-Christian times. Among the Druids, a pre-Christian religious group in Gaul, Ireland, and Britain, mistletoe was considered a sacred plant with powers to heal and to protect. Because it was so sacred, enemies who met under it were expected to pledge themselves to a truce. From this came the custom of placing it over a doorway as an invitation to peace, good will, and hospitality. After Britain became Christian, the use of mistletoe was forbidden because of pagan practices associated with it. For a while, however, it became a symbol of Christ at Christmas in Britain because of its reputation of healing powers.

Holly

The use of holly as a religious tradition and Christmas decoration originated in northern Europe, where it was called the "holy tree." Because of its appearance it became associated with the burning bush of Moses and Mary's burning love for God. The red berries and prick-