

“YEAR OF THE EUCHARIST”—ADVENT & CHRISTMAS SYMBOLS—BY FR. STEVE LAPE

It’s now fitting to talk about a couple of decorations that adorn churches around this time of year, since they serve as reminders of the Lord’s love for us and His main purpose for becoming one with us in the flesh:

+++Advent wreath—The custom of setting up Advent wreaths came into vogue among the German Lutherans in the 16th century, and has been adopted among a number of Christian denominations. Its circular shape suggests that God is eternal, with no beginning or end. The evergreen on it represents God’s sustaining love through all seasons. The 4 candles indicate 4 Sundays of Advent. The gradual lighting of each of the 4 candles represents the approaching birthday of the Light of the world—Jesus Christ, the King and Lord of the universe! The purple color on 3 of its candles represents sorrow for sin (which is more applicable during Lent), along with waiting & hoping. The pink candle on the wreath is lit for the 3rd Sunday of Advent, which is called “Gaudete Sunday,” with “gaudete” being the Latin word for “rejoice.” The rejoicing “pink” tone for that Sunday is to inject a joyful spirit of anticipation, as it indicates that we’re more than halfway through Advent and that Christmas is soon coming. Many people include a 5th candle in the middle, called the “Christ candle,” to be lit when Christmas arrives, indicating that Jesus has been born as the Light of the world, and is the central figure in world history.



+++Christmas tree—When we think of trees, we think of large, lively forms which produce other life forms, bearing leaves, fruit, or flowery buds, and serving as a home for birds and various animals. Symbolically, it reminds Christians that all life ultimately comes from God as a gift to us. From a biblical perspective, we may think of trees in terms of the Tree of Knowledge, from which Adam & Eve had been forbidden to eat from, but did anyway, due to the initial tempting from the serpent in the Paradise known as the garden of Eden. Yet, Jesus was born among us to redeem humanity from its original sin of disobedience to God, dying later on a “tree” (the wood of the cross), so that all human beings may hopefully die to sin and have new life beyond this world in heavenly bliss with God. Some debate surrounds the Christmas tree’s origins. Some researchers have suggested that earliest recorded history of it goes back to 15th Livonia (now Latvia &

Estonia.) Germans popularized these “paradise trees” & influenced other lands, such as France, England & the U.S., in the 18th & 19th centuries. Food items such as apples (reminding us of Adam & Eve’s temptation in the Book of Genesis), gingerbread, wafers, nuts, pastries, and dates were placed on the tree. Like so many other Christian traditions, which took various old pagan practices and replaced them with new, more sacred ones, the practice of decorating a tree (to celebrate the joyful, beautiful light of Christ, coming into our world to restore us & save us) replaced other ancient pagan customs which involved tree worship and belief in magical powers from trees.