

THE ADVENT CALENDAR – HISTORICAL ANTICIPATION

With the season of Advent approaching, many families will include an Advent calendar as part of their household preparations for Christmas. The calendar will likely be purchased, but the more adventurous will make their own. But what exactly is an Advent calendar? From where does it come? How does it fit in with our Catholic faith concerning the birth of Jesus?



The origins of the Advent Calendar are somewhat obscure. Tradition has it that in 567 AD monks began a fast in the month before Christmas. Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches had Nativity Fast that began on November 15. This was the first indication of a countdown to Christmas, which is what an Advent calendar actually is.

Our idea of counting the days until Christmas using a calendar began in Germany in the 19th Century. Families would indicate the days until Christmas by drawing chalk lines on a door or wall. People began putting up religious pictures as each day passed, or lighting candles. In the early 20th Century, newspapers and publishers began printing calendars on which people could mark the days. Gerhard Land developed a cardboard calendar and in the 1920s made the calendar with doors, behind which were Bible verses or pictures.

The production of calendars was interrupted by WWII. Later revived, by the 1950s calendars started including toys, candies or chocolates. As time progressed, calendars became less religious and just a secular way to count down the days until Christmas.

When one looks around at the variety of Advent Calendars commercially available today, it is difficult to recognise it for what it actually is.

The important question is: what does the calendar mean to the Christian vision of Jesus' birth on Christmas? Advent is a time of spiritual preparation, not just a countdown. It is a time of waiting, of anticipation and the longing of God's people who waited for the coming of the Messiah. Counting the days is like waiting year after year. It gives us time to think about why we needed a Saviour and to remember God's faithfulness to us. Advent helps us to anticipate the future with hope. It allows us to prepare in everyway (even our feast)! It puts us in the habit of waiting and watching for Jesus' return.