

The Advent Rose

In many of our local Carlisle area congregations a lovely annual tradition will be reenacted this Sunday. A rose will be exchanged between churches as a symbol of respect and affection.

Most “liturgical” Christians (Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and others) keep the four weeks before Christmas Day as the season of Advent. The four Sundays preceding Advent are each represented by a candle in the traditional Advent Wreath and lighted on succeeding Sundays until all four burn brightly in anticipation of the celebration of the Lord’s Nativity. Advent is a very special season of anticipation when Christians prepare for Christmas, yet give attention to our core belief that Jesus Christ will come a second time as both our judge and redeemer.

So, worship during Advent has a very unique feel. Many who visit our churches are surprised that we aren’t singing Christmas carols quite yet. We also refrain from decorating our churches for Christmas until we get closer to December 25. Instead of telling the Christmas story of Mary and Joseph, our readings from the Bible center on the challenging words of the Hebrew prophets and the story of John the Baptist who heralds the coming of the Christ. Our altars are draped in blue or purple, symbolic of hope and judgment.

Many years ago a special Advent tradition developed in Catholic Churches. On the Third Sunday of Advent the somber purple was replaced with rose colored altar hangings. Many Advent Wreaths maintain this tradition by using three purple candles and one rose colored or pink candle. In places a lovely custom evolved of exchanging a rose between congregations. This Sunday is also known by the Latin name, *Gaudete*, or “Rejoice Sunday”.

About 30 years ago, the Rev. Fr. Andrew Fontanella, the now retired pastor of St. Patrick’s Catholic Church in Carlisle, revived the rose exchange. Every year, representatives of St. Patrick’s are sent on the Third Sunday of Advent to area churches, bearing a rose which they formally present during a Sunday service. I know that we at St. John’s Episcopal Church, on the Square, look forward to this annual tradition. This year we will reciprocate by having one of our members present a rose at St. Patrick’s.

In Cumberland County we have more than 400 Christian congregations! If someone were to visit even a handful of these congregations, he or she would be immediately struck by the diversity of buildings, worship services, translations of the Bible, and cultural assumptions. Most of this diversity is firmly anchored in our histories. Our unique customs and beliefs define our denominational identities. But they also separate us.

In this season of hope, joy, and anticipation, it is certainly a fine thing for Christians to be affirming and greeting one another. In some ways, the rose exchange is like our exchange of Christmas cards. We are all one at Christmas in the proclamation of a

central Christian belief: Jesus Christ was born as our savior. The peace which the angels proclaimed must begin with us. Wouldn't it be terrific if all Christians would greet one another this weekend as a gesture of our love for each other in Jesus Christ? And if we can't at least do that, do we have any authentic "Good News" to share with a broken and divided world?

Thanks to our friends at St. Patrick's for their good example! And greetings to all the Christian congregations of the region from your friends on the Square!

The Rev. Canon Mark A. Scheneman
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