

Why is one candle not like all the others?

On the Advent wreath, the three purple candles mark the preparation Christians undergo while awaiting the arrival of Christ on Earth.

But, unlike Lent, Advent is usually a happy season, full of food, parties, shopping, music and lights. In the retail world, Christmas begins right after Halloween and then kicks into overdrive on the day after Thanksgiving. Many people mirror this, barely putting away the leftover turkey before putting up every Christmas decoration they own.

While this calendar is fine for secular society, it has nothing to do with the Child at the heart of the season. He won't be here until Christmas Eve, and all the earlybird sales in the world won't speed that up.

That's why it's traditional (though not required) to refrain from putting the Christ Child into a Nativity scene manger until the appointed moment.

So, why do we need a reminder to rejoice on the Third Sunday of Advent, called Gaudete Sunday (Latin for "rejoice") by lighting a rose-colored candle on our wreaths and having priests wear rose-colored vestments at Mass?

Because the happiness that comes from fun and friends and

a full belly is not the same thing as Christian joy.

During a Mass at Casa Santa Maria in Rome, Pope Francis talked about the difference between happiness and joy:

“To be happy is good, yet joy is something more. It’s another thing, something which does not depend on external motivations, or on passing issues: it is more profound. It is a gift.

“To be ‘happy at all moments, at all cost,’ can at the end turn into superficiality and shallowness. This leaves us without Christian wisdom, which makes us naïve, right? All is joy ... no. Joy is something else; it is a gift from the Lord.”

If joy is a gift from the Lord, then the Lord Himself is our first and greatest gift, and the only one that will never tarnish or break or fade. Gaudete Sunday reminds us that the gift has not yet arrived, but it’s very near.

And it’s not just a Catholic thing.

Advent wreaths are common in the Western church, including among Episcopalians, Lutherans and other mainline Christian denominations, which sometimes substitute a blue candle for the rose one blue, though, is not a Catholic liturgical color, even though Mary is often portrayed in blue robes.

We read in Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall

say it again, rejoice! Your kindness should be known to all. The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

So even though we may be having happy times during Advent, Gaudete Sunday is a moment to stop and reflect on the source of true joy. And if the Advent season has brought causes for stress and sorrow into our lives, then lighting the rose candle is an opportunity to take heart and refocus on what the Mass of Christ is all about.

Perhaps we’ll have the same revelation that came upon the pinched and petulant title character of Dr. Seuss’ “How the Grinch Stole Christmas,” as he stood atop Mount Crumpit with all the Who’s Christmas goodies piled high on a sleigh, ready to be dumped.

But up from Whoville, divested of all its festive finery and fine food, came not howls of anguish nor shouts of anger but the sound of sweet singing.

“And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow

**Stood puzzling and puzzling, 'How could it be so?
'It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
'It came without packages, boxes or bags!'
And he puzzled three hours, 'till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
'Maybe Christmas,' he thought, 'doesn't come from a store.
'Maybe Christmas ... perhaps ... means a little bit more!'"**

Christ is coming. Prepare ye the way of the Lord.