

Symbols of the Season

ADVENT = Owl. In traditional art, Lady Wisdom, whom the scriptures describe as God's bride, sometimes is shown with a wise old owl nearby. During Advent we ask Lady Wisdom to "come and show your people the way to salvation."

IMMACULATE CONCEPTION = White pine. Our ancestors were mystified about how conifers reproduce. Where are the flowers? And yet without flowers conifers produce abundant seeds. For this reason pines became symbols of the Virgin Mary.

CHRISTMAS = Ox and Ass. The gospels don't mention these animals. The opening chapter of the book of the prophet Isaiah does, however, which says that even the ox and ass know who feeds them. In a like manner we should recognize the Lord in our midst.

CHRISTMAS = Holly. Christmas has a lot of Easter in it. Holly's prickly foliage has been called "Christ's thorn," and the red berries are compared to his blood. The evergreen foliage is a sign of the life that is stronger than death.

HOLY FAMILY = Paperwhite Narcissus. Winter-blooming flowers are signs of paradox, of the things (in the words of G.K. Chesterton) that "cannot be but that are," of the mystery of the incarnation in which immortality is wrapped within the mortal.

MARY, MOTHER OF GOD = English Ivy. The ivy vine using holly as its support is a sign of the Christian clinging to Christ. Ivy is transfigured in treetops from a flowerless vine into a fruitful and sturdy shrub, and for this reason has become a symbol of Mary, as well as of every Christian made fruitful in baptism.

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD = Mistletoe. Mistletoe magically roots itself in tree branches and so seems suspended between earth and sky. No wonder that it, like the olive borne by Noah's dove, has become an emblem of the reconciliation of heaven and earth!

BAPTISM OF THE LORD = Olive. According to ancient laws even warfare is not an excuse to chop down an olive tree. Human societies come and go, olive trees live for centuries.

WINTER ORDINARY TIME = Deer. Psalm 42 has been a favorite for members of the church, especially during the procession toward the baptismal font: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God."

***Flowers and Festivals* by W.A. Barrett of St. Paul's Cathedral, London; 1868
Sourcebook for Sundays and Seasons, LTP, Chicago; 2004**