

History and Mystery: The O Antiphons in a Favorite Advent Hymn

I first became intrigued by the relationship between “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” the season of Advent, and the O antiphons a few years ago when I chanced to find a Youtube show in which Fr. William George Rutler presented some of this hymn’s rich history. Last year during Advent, I posted ten quotes from this video in “Top Ten Thoughts about Advent from Fr. Rutler.” As Fr. Rutler said in thought #2 in my post, “The Church has wonderful hymns for Advent, and if we don’t keep Advent, we are going to miss them. We know one very well, and because we’ve lost Advent, we tend to think of it as a Christmas hymn: ‘O Come O Come Emmanuel.’ ”

Because many additional fascinating details are associated with the origins and history of this hymn, this year I want to dig deeper, and look at where the hymn came from.

Fr. Rutler continued, “The Latin version of ‘O Come O Come Emmanuel,’ which came first, is called ‘Veni, Veni, Emmanuel.’” Corpus Christi Watershed just published a post with the original version of this hymn, which was arranged for two voices, here. A large part of what makes this hymn especially interesting to me is the origin of its verses. Each verse in the hymn is a modified version of one of the seven O antiphons. As Fr. Rutler explained, an antiphon is a short line that precedes a liturgical hymn. The particular collection of antiphons that made their way into the hymn is called the O antiphons for the somewhat prosaic reason that they each begin with an O.



Each night between Dec. 17 and 23, wherever Latin Vespers or the vernacular Evening Prayer are prayed, one of these O antiphons is sung or recited before and after the Magnificat. In the post-Vatican II form of the Mass, each of the O antiphons is also included as the Gospel Acclamation during the Mass of the day. The O antiphons powerfully express the Church’s longing and awe at this time of heightened anticipation, while Advent is coming to a close, and the feast of Christmas approaches.

The Magnificat, of course, is the canticle of Our Lady, which she sang under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost during her visit with her cousin Elizabeth soon after the annunciation. Eminent liturgist Dom Prosper Gueranger wrote that these antiphons are sung at the Magnificat, “to show us that the Saviour whom we expect is to come to us by Mary.”

The Church enters today on the seven days which precede the Vigil of Christmas, and which are known in the liturgy under the name of the Greater Ferias. The ordinary of the Advent Office becomes more solemn; the antiphons of the psalms, both for Lauds and the Hours of the day, are proper, and allude expressly to the great coming. Every day, at Vespers, is sung a solemn antiphon, consisting of a fervent prayer to the Messiah, whom it addresses by one of the titles given Him in the sacred Scriptures. . . . The canonical Hour of Vespers has been selected as the most appropriate time for this solemn supplication to our Saviour, because, as the Church sings in one of her hymns, it was in the evening of the world (*vergente mundi vespere*) that the Messiah came amongst us.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of Advent as making present the expectation of the Messiah: as we prepare to celebrate His first coming, we also prepare for His second coming.

524 When the Church celebrates the liturgy of Advent each year, she makes present this ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for the Saviour’s first coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming.”

Messianic Titles

Each of the seven O antiphons starts with one of the names of a Scriptural type of the Messiah. He is the Wisdom of God, the Ruler of the House of Israel, the Root of Jesse, the Key of David, the Dawn, the King of the Nations, and God with us.

Date	O Antiphon
12/17	O SAPIENTIA (O WISDOM FROM THE MOST
12/18	O ADONAI (RULER OF THE HOUSE OF ISRAEL)
12/19	O RADIX JESSE (ROOT OF JESSE)
12/20	O CLAVIS DAVID (KEY OF DAVID)
12/21	O ORIENS (RISING DAWN/DAYSPRING)
12/22	O REX GENTIUM (KING OF THE NATIONS)
12/23	O EMMANUEL (GOD WITH US)

And each O antiphon ends by calling out to the Savior to come and to show us the power that is

associated with the particular Messianic name that the antiphon uses.

Incidentally, but interestingly, the hymn verses are much shorter than the corresponding antiphons, and the verses are not in the same order as the sequence in which the O antiphons are sung. For one example, the last O antiphon on Dec. 23 is addressed to Emmanuel, which means God with us, while the hymn begins with the verse about Emmanuel.

For a concrete example of the pattern followed each of the O antiphons, following is the antiphon for Dec. 17th. It begins by addressing God as O Sapientia, O Wisdom, then it describes what God's wisdom does, and it ends with a petition, "come to teach us the way of prudence."

O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti, attingens a fine usque ad finem, fortiter suaviter disponensque omnia: veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.

O Wisdom, that proceedest from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end mightily, and disposing all things sweetly! come and teach us the way of prudence."

These are the corresponding modified hymn verses.

Veni, O Sapientia, quae hic disponis omnia, veni, viam prudentiae ut doceas et gloriae. R: Gaude! Gaude! Emmanuel, nascetur pro te Israel!

O Come Thou Wisdom from on high, that orderest all things mightily. to us the path of knowledge show, and teach us in your ways to go. R: Rejoice! Rejoice! O Israel, to thee shall come Emmanuel!"

To show how deeply it is possible to delve when exploring the meaning of each antiphon, here is Dom Gueranger's commentary about this first O antiphon.

O uncreated Wisdom, who art so soon to make Thyself visible to Thy creatures, truly Thou disposest all things. It is by Thy permission that the emperor Augustus issues a decree ordering the enrolment of the whole world. Each citizen of the vast empire is to have his name enrolled in the city of his birth. This prince has no other object in this order, which sets the world in motion, but his own ambition. Men go to and fro by millions, and an unbroken procession traverses the immense Roman world; men think they are doing the bidding of man, and it is God whom they are obeying. This world-wide agitation has really but one object; it is, to bring to Bethlehem a man and woman who live at Nazareth in Galilee, in order that this woman, who is unknown to the world but dear to heaven, and who is at the close of the ninth month since she conceived her Child, may give birth to this Child in Bethlehem; for the Prophet has said of HIM: 'His going forth is from the beginning, from the days of eternity. And thou, O Bethlehem! art not the least among the thousand cities of Juda, for out of thee He shall come.' O divine Wisdom! how strong art Thou in thus reaching Thine ends by means which are infallible, though hidden; and yet, how sweet, offering no constraint to man's free-will; and withal, how fatherly, in providing for our necessities! Thou chooseth Bethlehem for Thy birth-place, because Bethlehem signifies the house of bread. In this, Thou teachest us that Thou art our Bread, the nourishment and support of our life. With God as our food, we cannot die. O Wisdom of the Father, living Bread that hast descended from heaven, come speedily into us, that thus we may approach to Thee and be enlightened by Thy light, and by that prudence which leads to salvation."

Bringing the O Antiphons Home

Many Catholics are becoming interested in including the O antiphons as part of their Advent preparations, by singing or reciting or listening to recordings (or doing all of these things) between Dec. 17 and 23. Everyone can find renewed inspiration at the end of Advent by praying the O antiphons as a countdown to the great feast that is to come. Numerous craft ideas to reinforce their significance for children are available on the Internet, for example [here](#) and [this excellent one here](#).

ERO CRAS: I Will Be Tomorrow

My middle school Latin students were greatly impressed with this tidbit about the O antiphons, so I suspect other children will be too. The initials of the first words of the O antiphons form an acrostic when you reverse them: ERO CRAS.

12/23	O Emmanuel	E
12/22	O Rex Gentium	R
12/21	O Oriens	O
12/20	O Clavis David	C
12/19	O Radix Jesse	R
12/18	O Adonai	A
12/17	O Sapientia	S

This is understood as Christ saying to us, “I will be tomorrow.” I don’t know about you, but that gives me goose bumps.

Roseanne T. Sullivan