

O Antiphons

Darren Henson, STL



“Oh, my goodness! It’s Advent!” That was the usual reaction I heard as a child when the long Thanksgiving weekend began to wind down. We would make a frantic dash to the dark basement storage room in search of our Advent wreath and colored candles.

Our family had the tradition of lighting the wreath every night before supper. Our prayer was accompanied by a verse of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” It wasn’t until I was an adult that I learned that each verse of the song belongs to a particular day between December 17–23 in the Advent calendar.

The final eight days of Advent are accentuated by these “O” statements that lead to the eight days of the Christmas octave. The week-long prelude intensifies the longing heart for the Savior of the world.

The “O” statements are antiphons that appear at Evening Prayer before and after the Gospel canticle is prayed. The images are so rich that in the Middle Ages, they were woven into a hymn that became associated with the entire season of Advent. Today, in addition to appearing at Evening Prayer, they are also found in the daily liturgy. They take turns, one a day, serving as the verse to the Gospel Acclamation: “O Wisdom,” “O Sacred Lord,” “O Flower of Jesse’s Stem,” “O Key of David,” “O Radiant Dawn,” “O King of All Nations,” and the most expected and greatest of them all, “O Emmanuel.” They end December 23rd, because evening prayer on December 24th is the beginning of the Christmas vigil.

The original Latin titles for these images formed an acrostic to reveal a hidden message. The first letter of each phrase added to the next and then reversed spelled *Ero Cras*, or “I will come tomorrow.”

Some parishes will sing the familiar song throughout Advent, and it is one that should not be overlooked. Waiting to break out the O Antiphons until December 17 will emphasize the seasonal practice of patient waiting. Whenever they are prayed or sung, these images

intend to inspire awe and wonder. They leave us with the speechless response of “Oh!” as we contemplate the multiple images that Christ fulfills.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Which image in the O Antiphons seems the most unfamiliar to you? What does it tell us about the season?
- How does your understanding of Christmas change when you ponder that Christ fulfills all seven of these O images?
- Where in your life do you need wisdom? The Lord to reveal himself? New growth? An opened door? A radiant new day? A ruler? And God among us?

For a deeper understanding of the O Antiphons, visit <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Advent-O-Antiphons.htm>, a site that lists each antiphon, its refrain, the Latin translation, the acclamation translation, and biblical references.

HOME ACTIVITIES

Create a countdown to Christmas. Beginning December 17, take one O Antiphon image each day. Use it to begin a prayer around your family’s Advent wreath, or sing the corresponding verse of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

Share with others how this image might be important to living a Christian life?

(The Web site, <http://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Advent-O-Antiphons.htm>, has a chart with each antiphon with its entire refrain, the Latin translation, the Acclamation translation, and then biblical references.) **R**

SCRIPTURE CORNER

Wisdom 9:1–6

Sirach 24

Isaiah 9:1–2, 11:1–3

Slowly read and ponder these texts. Can you sense and identify with their anticipation and excitement?

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