

Fact of FAITH

The “O” Antiphons of Advent

by Rev. Larry Rice, CSP

When I’m out shopping in mid-November, and I hear the strains of “Silver Bells” and “The Little Drummer Boy” wafting from hidden store speakers, I just want to cover my ears. By the middle of December each year, I’ve usually had it up to here with most Christmas music. The ever-present repetition of Christmas carols often serves to point out that the rest of the world is celebrating Christmas, while we’re still in the season of Advent.

For me, the one exception to this audio barrage is a simple chant for Advent, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.” This song, with its longing for the coming of the Savior, genuinely belongs to Advent and not to Christmas. Its melody is based on Gregorian chant, and its verses are all taken from the Church’s “O antiphons.” These antiphons introduce the Magnificat, or Cantic of Mary, in the Evening Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours from December 17 through December 23. Each antiphon begins with a traditional title for Christ. They are: “O Wisdom,” “O Leader of the House of Israel [Adonai],” “O Root of Jesse’s Stem,” “O Key of David,” “O Radiant Dawn,” “O King of all the nations,” and finally, “O Emmanuel” which means “God with us.” Each of these traditional titles for the Messiah connects the coming of Christ with the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. You can find the “O Antiphon” prayers online at www.usccb.org/advent.

In some Catholic parishes, the Sunday liturgies during Advent feature the tune of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” as the setting for the Sanctus, the Great Amen, and other sung parts of the Mass. While it’s asking a lot for this simple tune to bear so much repetition for four weeks, this setting does anchor us firmly in the longing and anticipation of Advent. The original hymn, with its pleading for Christ’s coming, serves as a welcome antidote to the onslaught of bad commercial Christmas music that we have to endure every November and December. It also connects us to the Evening Prayer of the whole Church in the last week of Advent.

Father Rice is Vocations Director for the Paulist Fathers