

SUNDAY *to* SUNDAY

WHAT ARE THE “O” ANTIPHONS?

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. 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 Canticle 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.

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

WHAT IS GAUDETE SUNDAY?

What is special about the Third Sunday of Advent? For much of the Church's history, this Sunday had a special name: “Gaudete” Sunday. The traditions surrounding this Sunday go back as far as the fourth or fifth century, as does the season of Advent itself. Advent, our preparation for Christmas, was originally a forty-day penitential season like Lent. In fact, since it used to begin on November 12 (just after the Memorial of St. Martin of Tours), it was called “St. Martin's Lent.” “Gaudete Sunday” was the Advent counterpart to “Laetare Sunday,” which marks the mid-point in Lent.

On Gaudete Sunday, the season of Advent shifts its focus. For the first two weeks of Advent, the focus can be summed up in the phrase, “The Lord is coming.” But beginning with Gaudete Sunday, the summary might be, “The Lord is near.” This shift is marked by a lighter mood and a heightened sense of joyous anticipation.

Liturgically, the colors lighten as well. The priest usually wears rose-colored vestments, a hue seen only on Gaudete Sunday and Laetare Sunday. On this day, we light the third candle of the Advent wreath, which is also rose-colored, or if you prefer, pink.

The word “Gaudete” is Latin for “Rejoice.” This celebration is a reminder that God who loves us is still in charge and that we await his coming not with fear, but with tremendous joy. Today's Second Reading, from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, reflects this joy: “Brothers

and sisters: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”

THE “O ANTIPHONS” OF ADVENT

On the last days of Advent, you may wish to add these “O Antiphons” to your evening prayer, your prayer at table, or your bedtime prayer.

DECEMBER 17

O Wisdom of our God Most High,
guiding creation with power and love:
come to teach us the path of knowledge!

DECEMBER 18

O Leader of the House of Israel,
giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai:
come to rescue us with your mighty power!

DECEMBER 19

O Root of Jesse's stem,
sign of God's love for all his people:
come to save us without delay!

DECEMBER 20

O Key of David,
opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom:
come and free the prisoners of darkness!

DECEMBER 21

O Radiant Dawn,
splendor of eternal light, sun of justice:
come and shine on those who dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death.

DECEMBER 22

O King of all nations and keystone of the Church:
come and save man, whom you formed from the dust!

DECEMBER 23

O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of Law:
come to save us, Lord our God!

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