

## ADVENT ANTIPHONAL ACROSTICS: AWAITING THE COMING LIGHT OF CHRIST

Noted political pundit and inveterate baseball fan George Will once wryly commented that baseball is one sport wherein the level of enjoyment is directly proportional to one's level of knowledge about it. In other words, if you know the intricacies and strategies of the game, you will appreciate the game that much more. So too, I believe with regard to the liturgy of the Catholic Church, which has layer upon layer of meaning. The liturgy is the source and summit of our Catholic Faith and the degree to which we carry it out fully and reverently impacts our lives. Take for example, my favorite Advent hymn, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The O Antiphons are sung or recited with the Magnificat during Vespers from December 17 through December 23 inclusive. Anglicans and Lutherans also employ these historic antiphons.

We have been reciting the "O" antiphons at Evening Prayer this past week, providing rich food for our meditation during this brief season of Advent. Each stanza highlights a title for the Messiah: *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom), *O Adonai* (O Lord), *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse), *O Clavis David* (O Key of David), *O Oriens* (O Rising Sun), *O Rex Gentium* (O King of the Nations), and *O Emmanuel*. Each verse praises the coming of the Savior by a different name, and closes with petitions appropriate to the title. According to musical scholars, the arrangement was not accidental. It is called an acrostic, something known to puzzle fanatics. If one starts with the last title and takes the first letter of each one - **E**mmanuel, **R**ex, **O**riens, **C**lavis, **R**adix, **A**donai, **S**apientia - the Latin words *ero cras* are formed, translated as, "Tomorrow, I will be [there]." Those of you reading this on Sunday December 23 may take this quite literally!

Their first mention of the group of antiphons dates to the philosopher and theologian **Boethius** († 524 AD) who in referencing them, suggested their use. At the magnificent French Benedictine abbey in Fleury (resting place of St. Benedict), the antiphons were recited by the abbot and then a gift was presented to each member of the monastic community. By the eighth century, they were in use in the Advent liturgy (cf. Rev. William Saunders, "What are the 'O Antiphons?'" *Arlington Catholic Herald*). One detects a movement of time throughout all the seven antiphons: *O Wisdom* (God's eternal Wisdom of old); *O Adonai* (time of Moses, 1350 BC); *O Radix Jesse* (preparing the line of David, 1100BC); *O Clavis David* (time of David, 1000 BC), and so on. It is intriguing to note that the antiphons of the final days before Christmas speak more than once of the "darkness" and the "shadow of death." The theme highlights our tremendous need to be freed from the darkness of our sin, and that only One so great as a Savior could do this. The antiphons take their cue from the prophets, especially Isaiah, as seen in the biblical references below.

The antiphons likely have this monastic origin; after all those monks were prolific, placing a high emphasis on the liturgy, and were not consumed with "lights, locks, leaks, litter and litigation," as are many pastors, so I am told! They had sufficient time for reflection and were quite creative. One verse was sung or chanted each evening (rather than being sung together as a single hymn, as we do today). It is quite possible that by the 12th century, five of the antiphons had been combined to form the verses of a single hymn with its refrain "*Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel nascetur pro te, Israel*" ("Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel"). As each day progressed, the faithful inch closer to the birth of the Savior. The liturgy unfolds the mystery, giving voice to the **longing and expectation** of the people for the birth of the Messiah. Notice, that the "rejoice" command stands alone, followed by "Emmanuel shall come." We typically sing it as if Emmanuel is the object of rejoice. No, He is **the reason** for it.

**17 December:** "O Wisdom, you who come forth from the mouth of the Most High, arranging all things from beginning to end mightily, and disposing them sweetly; come to teach us the way of prudence." **18 December:** "O Adonai and leader of the house of Israel, you Who appeared to Moses in a fire of burning bush and gave him the Law on Sinai. O come and save us with your outstretched arm." **19 December:** "O Root of Jesse, you stand as a signal of the peoples; before whom kings will contain their mouths (remain silent); to whom the nations will earnestly pray. O come to deliver us, and do not delay." **20 December:** "O Key of David (Rev 3:7), and scepter of the house of Israel; who opens, no one closes; who closes and no one opens (Isa 22:22): come, and lead out the fettered from the house of prison, sitting in darkness and the shadow of death." (Ps 107:10); **21 December:** "O Rising dawn (Zac 6:12), splendor of eternal light (Hab 3:4) and Sun of Justice (Mal

3:20): come and illumine those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.” (Lk 1:78); **22 December:** “O King of Nations, and longed for One of them; cornerstone, you who make both one: come and save mankind, whom you formed from the mud.” (Isa 2:4); **23 December:** “O Emmanuel (Isa 7:14; 8:8), our King and Lawgiver (Gen 49:10; cf. Ezek 21:32), expected of the Nations, and their Savior; come to save us, Lord our God.” (cf. Isa 7:14).

As we pass the final hours before, and indeed celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, I pray that your **devout and joyful** preparation bears much spiritual fruit for you and your family. I am so blessed to be able to serve here. Despite my unworthiness, God graces me with the privilege of celebrating the Sacraments of Penance and Eucharist regularly for the many who avail themselves of His mercy and grace. We are all blessed to gaze upon the Crèche, to bask in the joyous light of our Savior who has overcome the darkness. Thank you for visiting the Cathedral—I am most grateful for your presence today!

- After learning that a Nativity scene would not be allowed in a Mall, a resourceful Scottish couple decided to make themselves into a **living crèche**, dressing up as the Holy Family! The Mall near Edinburgh reconsidered and allowed a display after all, but such **legal disputes** have only increased of late. The Illinois Capitol permitted a display by the Satanic Temple a sculpture of an arm with a snake coiled around it, holding an apple. Sacrilegiously, it was placed right next to a Christmas tree.
- Our floral decorations do not appear mysteriously out of thin air. I am tremendously grateful, both to our staff and **treasured volunteers** for their assistance in preparing the chapels and the sanctuary for Advent and Christmas. The Church looks magnificent!
- I was encouraged by Archbishop Hebda’s recent call for the creation of an **independent review board** “for investigating and assessing any allegations” made against any bishop, just as exists for priests and deacons. He is disappointed in the lack of progress made nationally and internationally and will continue to advocate for transparency. Click the link on the Cathedral website to read the letter.
- If you are here for the 4th Sunday of Advent, I hope you’ll return shortly to celebrate with us at the Cathedral. “Merry \_\_\_\_\_ !” [Wait between 23-46 hours, insert samtsirhC and reverse the letters].

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector