

The "O" Antiphons of Advent



by

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During the last week of Advent the Church looks forward with intensified anticipation to the birth of Jesus. Beginning on December 17, in the antiphons that introduce the Canticle of Mary each evening at Vespers we invoke Jesus under seven special titles which focus our attention on what He comes to be for us.

These are called the "O" Antiphons.

December 17: O Wisdom!

December 18: O Lord and Leader!

December 19: O Shoot of Jesse!

December 20: O Key of David!

December 21: O Dawn!

December 22: O King!

December 23: O Emmanuel!

Read, reflect and enjoy!

**O Wisdom proceeding from
the mouth of the Most High,
The Alpha and Omega of all insight,
Who show us all things framed between their beginning and their end;
Who place all goods in perspective under the strong, agreeable rule of truth;
Come, teach us the life-giving way,
Come, show us the path of salvation.**

In the last week before Christmas the Church puts a special edge on her anticipation. By addressing Jesus in our liturgy each day for seven days under one of seven specially chosen titles (called the "O antiphons"), we focus our hope and our thoughts on what He is coming to be for us: what He wants to be and will be for us if we allow Him.

The first of these titles is "Wisdom." Jesus is the wisdom of God made flesh and presented to us in human form so that we might see in Him and learn from Him the "life-giving way" -- that way of living which leads to the fullness of life both on this earth and forever.

In the Scriptures "wisdom" means the knowledge of how to live. The "wise" are those who know the art of living well, who order their lives in a way that leads to happiness. They are not deceived by illusory values; they know where true happiness is found and what it consists in. They are blessed with the gift of distinguishing between good and evil.

This wisdom does not come through human reflection alone; it is a gift of God. Only the Creator, the Designer of our human natures, can teach us how to get the most out of the equipment He has given us. Even more obviously, only the God who lifts us up to share in His own divine nature by grace can teach us how to live on the level of grace, which is the level of God. That is why we pray today to the "Creator and Redeemer of the human race" that we might "share the divinity of Christ" -- and not just in fact, but by living like Him in conscious awareness, attitude and action. This is what it means to be "wise" in the age of grace.

All of us are born into what Scripture calls the "darkness" of this world. We pick up from our society certain distorted attitudes, wrong values, false priorities and destructive patterns of behavior. Before we are old enough to judge for ourselves, desires and fears are programmed into us by slogans and trends in our society which incline us to sin. Every human teacher or culture is infected to some degree. There is no undistorted light to live by in this world. We "sit in darkness and in the shadow of death" (see Isaiah 9:1, Matthew 4:16).

But in Jesus God responded to the need of the waiting world by coming Himself to be Wisdom incarnate -- the embodied example of how to live. Now that Jesus has come, "the light shines in the darkness." In Jesus God does not just tell us; He shows us how to live life "to the full." Wisdom, the secret of how to get the most out of life, is ours for the asking. It is ours for the looking, because in the life of Jesus Wisdom was embodied in human actions and choices. It is ours for the reading, because in the teaching of Jesus divine Wisdom is put into human words. Wisdom is taking disciples.

Jesus is the life-giving Way, the never-misleading Truth and the fullness of Life made visible. If we follow Him we will not walk in the perilous darkness of our cultural assumptions, but will be guided by the Light of Life (see John 1:1-9; 8:12). All we need to do is read and reflect, listen, believe and act.

Jesus is also a challenge to our faith. The Way He teaches is a shocking absurdity to the distorted intelligence of this world (see 1 Corinthians 1:17 to 2:16). We cannot easily accept the example of His life as what we want for ourselves and for our children. That is why, the Church invites us to pray repeatedly, "O Wisdom proceeding from the mouth of the Most High, come! Teach us the life-giving way!"

**O Lord and Leader of the house of Israel,
Who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush
And gave him the holy Law on Sinai mountain,
Come, stretch out your mighty arm and redeem us!**

Jesus is called "Lord and Leader," or in some translations "Shepherd," because He not only rules His Church, but goes ahead of us, leading us forward, inspiring us to new levels of life and activity. He opens up new horizons and exciting opportunities for growth. He is the Leader of a people on the march, of a Church with a mission to accomplish.

We need leaders because they give forward motion to our lives. Lawmakers give stability, and law enforcers maintain order. But leaders give inspiration, arouse enthusiasm, and fire us with a sense of purpose and mission. That is why the Church asks God to give us more than the "holy Law" He gave through Moses on Mount Sinai. Our prayer to Jesus is, "stretch out your arm and redeem us." In the Opening Prayer of the Mass for this day we ask God to "renew us" through the birth of Jesus and "free us from our slavery to sin."

Laws cannot free us from sin. As St. Paul observed, "the law does nothing but point out what is sinful" (Romans 3:20). Without the power that comes from "the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ" we are helpless to obey the law of God as we should. And even with grace, if our focus is only on law observance our religion stays static, turns stagnant and "stupefies;" that is, becomes "tediously uninteresting" to the point of dulling the ordinary activity and keenness of our minds

Laws alone not only leave us "slaves of sin," they have their own power to enslave. The better the laws, the more they tend to become the fixed pattern of our lives, resisting all innovation and change, excluding from consideration everything that is not already established. Observance of the law of God Himself can become a phariseeism so fixed, so sufficient to itself, that it rejects even the advent of Jesus the Messiah. That is why, though we have God's law, we need to be redeemed, renewed and freed by Jesus as "Leader and Lord."

The focus of our hope today is on Jesus "Lord and Leader," because by joining us to Himself in His mission, Jesus gives a new meaning, a new value, a new excitement and motivation to our lives. When we become mature enough in our faith to realize that we are called to cooperate with Him in saving the world, our whole understanding of religion changes. It is no longer just a set of rules and observances. It is no longer a limitation on our activity. It is not even just a way to personal peace, wellbeing and fulfillment. Our religion becomes a vocation, a mission, a call to take initiatives, to expand our minds and hearts, to make a contribution to the human race.

And belonging to the Church takes on new meaning for us. We are no longer just "in" the Church; we are "of" the Church: part of her life, of her action, of her continuing exploration and discovery and apostolate. Because we see ourselves as working members of the Church and sharers in her mission, every new direction she takes, every new initiative, every response she makes to current problems and to the challenges of our time is a signal for us. We see in the Church the embodied presence, the visible initiatives of Jesus, Leader and Lord. As the Church responds to the inspirations of Christ her Head, we respond and move with her.

Jesus is where the action is, and that action begins in His Church -- in us -- when we respond to His leadership. To do this we need to be aware that He is a Leader, that He is taking us somewhere. And so we pray on this day to be saved from stagnation: "Come Lord and Leader. Stretch out your arm and redeem us."

**O Shoot from the dry root of Jesse,
raised up as a sign for all people,
Before you the sovereigns fall silent
And hope gathers nations in prayer.
Come free us! Lord, do not delay!**

Resurgence is the theme of this title of Jesus. He is the "shoot," the "sprout" springing out of the dry stump, out of the dormant root, of the house of Jesse, father of King David (see Isaiah 11:10-12). His emergence as the promised Messiah, "Son of David," is sign and proof of unseen vitality within the "remnant of His people." He is the sign of God's power overcoming death and the cause of death: sin.

Christ's victory over sin, and over all the destructive, disintegrating, discouraging consequences of sin, is His glory. And this victory is not a one-time peak of accomplishment; it is repeated over and over. Every time we sin, every time death prevails over life in any way, in individuals or in society, the power of Christ is able to revitalize us. This is the proclamation of our faith.

This is not just God's doing. St. Irenaeus teaches that "the glory of God is life in man." The "splendor of Christ's glory" shines out in the human persons He is able to heal and make whole, to bring to life -- and not just to life, but to the glory of sharing in God's own divine life by grace. Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it to the full!" (John 10:10). And Irenaeus says, "Just as a doctor is judged in his care for the sick, so God is revealed in what He does with men" (Office of Readings for June 28 & December 19). The glory of Jesus the Savior shines out, not just in His own divine goodness, but in His power to save the human race which God created and with whom Jesus identified Himself by His Incarnation.

In today's Opening Prayer we ask for "true faith and love to celebrate the mystery of God made man." The glory of this mystery is in the fact that we are made God -- and not just passively, as inert objects of salvation. We are able, as human beings, to respond to grace. Jesus doesn't simply dismiss our human natures and replace them. He does something even more glorious: He enables us to respond; He calls our humanity to life.

Centuries of sin and darkness have not been able to frustrate God's creation or deaden us completely to the inbreaking of God's light. Through the long, cold winter of our alienation from God, the fire of our desire for Him has not died out. Just as God always made sure that in spite of fire and sword, exile and slavery, a "remnant" of His People survived (see Isaiah 10:20-22), so something of His creation remains in us able to respond and come back to life at the invitation of His word, by the power of His grace. And Jesus, the "Shoot of Jesse," sprout and sign of life from dormant root and dried-out stump, is the sign raised up to gather the nations together in hope.

Jesus is the sign that God can call us out of the tomb, give spirit to dry bones, make the desert bloom and dried-up stumps sprout with new life. No matter how helpless we find ourselves against temptation, no matter how long we have been dead to faith, to hope, to love, He can restore us and make our hearts alive. We never have to say we have lost the fervor to be generous or write ourselves off as incurably mediocre. We never have to reconcile ourselves to a life or a religion without love, without joy. Jesus as the "Shoot of Jesse" is a promise of new life.

He is also the divine approval of growth. A shoot is a growing thing, not "perfect" in the sense of a finished product. As "Shoot of Jesse" Jesus validates the present of our lives as an intermediary moment between what we were and what we are called to be. He encourages us to accept ourselves as we are even while we pray insistently to be delivered from everything that holds us back. And so we pray, "O Shoot of Jesse, come free us! Lord, do not delay!"

**O Key of David and scepter of the house of Israel,
You open wide and no one closes;
You close fast and no one opens.
Come -- lead out the bound ones
from their imprisoning retreat
where they sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death.**

Sin isolates and alienates people. Not just our personal sins, but the sin of the world, combined with our fragility, our woundedness, causes us to close up against one another. When we are hurt, angry, rejected, afraid, we wall ourselves off from the world. We retreat to "sit in darkness and the shadow of death," losing even the power sometimes to penetrate the walls of our own making. We make a hell of isolation for ourselves and are unable to break out of it.

Carried far enough this takes us over the edge, into the pit of no return: into mental reclusiveness, insanity -- even into the everlasting isolation of Hell if we refuse to let the love of God Himself draw us out. But even on an everyday level we have all experienced moments, days, longer or shorter periods in our lives when we were incapable of rejoining the human race by our own willpower. We "sat in the shadow of death" until someone came to us in love, broke through our imprisoning, pseudo-protective walls, and led us out. From this perspective we recognize Jesus as "Key of David." He is the one who opens and leads us out. He comes to us. He penetrates our defenses. And He does it through a love founded on relationship; -- as one of us, as a member of the family of David, of our human family.

The Opening Prayer of today's liturgy begins, "God of love and mercy..." To have "mercy" means to "come to the aid of another out of a sense of relationship." Its meaning is traced back to a Semitic root which means "womb," and it speaks of the kind of bonding which a mother has for the child of her womb. Mercy is not help given out of condescension. It is not a largesse to the unfortunate members of a category of human beings we look upon as being "other" and different from ourselves. We can only show "mercy" to those whom we recognize as being in relationship with us, identified in some way with ourselves. If we used the words "compassion" (to "feel with") and "pity" (from the Latin pietas, the bonding which unites families) according to their root meanings, these words would mean the same as "mercy."

Mercy is God's answer to the woundedness, the hurt, the anger, the fear, or to anything else which walls us off from life, from love, from society, from communion and community with others. God took flesh in the womb of Mary so that everything He did for us would be grounded in relationship. He chose to be born of a woman, born into a family, born into the family of the human race. He saves us as one of us, as a brother. He made us children of the Father along with Himself. He took us into Himself, with all of our sins and sinfulness, and made us members of His own Body. Then He went to the cross as identified with us, to expiate the sins of His own flesh.

And Mary, in the name of all humanity, models for us the response to Jesus that saves. At God's invitation she opened her womb to Him, she welcomed Jesus as the Key of David: "At the message of an angel she welcomed Your eternal Son and, filled with the light of Your Spirit, she became the temple of Your Word." In her, and through her response, the lock received the Key: all of us, the human race, opened ourselves to love and to grace, and allowed ourselves to be led out of "darkness and the shadow of death."

In the Garden of Eden, the first effect of sin was to make Adam and Eve "clothe themselves," hide their true selves, their spontaneity under defenses and reserves. Now, in response to Christ's coming we pray, "Key of David! Come -- lead us out of darkness and the shadow of death!"

**O Dawn and splendor
of eternal light ,
Sun of Justice,
Come! Enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death!**

We compare Jesus to God as the dawn to the sun. The sun is eternal, unchanging, distant. Dawn is the sun born anew on our earth every day, a coming of the sun's light into our time and place. Every dawn is different, and yet every dawn is the light of the same eternal, unchanging sun.

Dawn is the sun "made flesh" on earth: the light of the sun shining red or gold or pink through the particular clouds and atmospheric conditions of each day. At dawn the light of the sun becomes incarnate in the reality of our world. It radiates through, is reflected by, and reveals everything that is on earth.

When we salute Jesus as the Dawn, we recognize in Him the splendor of God's "eternal light." Jesus Himself is the "Sun of Justice": "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God." But in Jesus God's splendor shines through human flesh, revealed in human terms, expressed in human words and actions. Jesus is the light of God "ever ancient, ever new," dawning to give life to the world, eternally the same, yet new and different every day.

Jesus continues to minister, in every new member of His Body, in different ways. Every person in grace radiates the light of Christ in a particular way. Every human choice inspired by faith reflects the light of Jesus uniquely, according to the circumstances in which it takes place. Every act which embodies God's love for others reveals, not only God, but persons to themselves in a new and life-giving way. Through the faith, the hope, the love that are made flesh in the actions of His Body on earth, the eternal light first mediated through the flesh of Jesus Christ continues to shine on earth, and the Light of the world dawns anew every day.

Today's Opening prayer asks, "May we who celebrate the birth of Your Son as man rejoice in the gift of eternal life when He comes in glory." We celebrate, not only Christ's "birth as man" at Christmas, but Christ's birth for us in every human being who becomes His Body by baptism. If we can recognize the infinite and eternal divine life revealing itself to us in a limited and passing way through the humanity of every person in grace, then Jesus the Dawn appears to us in each one as a reason to "rejoice in the gift of eternal life" -- that divine life which will be ours forever, without imperfection or reserves, when Jesus "comes in glory." The light which shines imperfectly through each of us in time is a promise of the Light which will shine with unmarred glory for all eternity in "that perfect man who is Christ come to full stature" when "God will be all in all" (see Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Corinthians 15:28).

Every dawn is the promise of another dawn, when the day is over and the night has passed. And every person we see is the promise and reminder of recurring grace calling the whole world out of darkness until that final Dawn when Jesus in His glory will be the Light of the City of God (see Revelation 21:23). And so we pray, Come, Dawn! Enlighten those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death!

**O King and desire of all nations,
The cornerstone of unity and peace,
Come! Save us your creatures,
whom You fashioned from the dust!**

The whole human race was created from the "dust of the earth." But from the moment we draw our first individual breath we try to lift ourselves out of the dust and fashion for ourselves an identity distinct from the common mass of humanity. We do this both as individuals and as nations -- and competitively, so that frequently "distinction" becomes confused with superiority and grows into divisiveness.

Historically kings have been used as symbols of their people's identity. In theory, and in the popular mind, the ruler embodies the ideals, aspirations and accomplishments of the nation. He is treated with the respect given to the nation itself, and his lifestyle should reflect back to the people the image or dream they have of their own beauty and greatness.

Unfortunately, just as rulers frequently seek to distinguish themselves at the expense of their people, so nations seek to distinguish themselves at the expense of other nations. It is unspokenly taken for granted that the first duty of rulers -- and of loyal citizens -- is to assure the survival and prosperity of their own people, even if this means destroying and impoverishing other nations. As a result, distinction between nations tends to become division between nations, and countries feel obliged, again and again, to preserve their self-identity by war.

Jesus refused to involve Himself in saving any nation as such. Although He was executed as "King of the Jews," His own people rejected Him because He refused to be the kind of nationalistic Messiah-King they expected. Jesus would only rule over a kingdom embracing the whole human race, without ethnic, racial or national boundaries. The plan of God which He was sent to accomplish is "to bring everything in heaven and on earth together into unity under Christ's headship" (see Ephesians 1:9-10). He came to be the "corner-stone," the meeting-point that joins all the peoples of the world in unity and peace. He is addressed as "King and desire of all nations" because, while He refuses to identify Himself with any one nation's aspirations, He is the fulfillment of all people's desire.

What the people of all nations share is a common origin from the "dust of the earth" and a common destiny to die: all human life is in bodies which cannot last. More basic than the surge of individual persons or nations toward self-identity through distinction from others is the desire to survive, to live forever. And Jesus alone can satisfy this desire. By offering "eternal life," He can bring together all the peoples of earth in a common striving motivated by the one desire which unifies them all.

Jesus is universal King because He not only symbolizes, but embodies and fulfills the one longing which can unify the human race in peace, pursuing a common goal. As today's Opening Prayer proclaims, Jesus has power "to free the human race" from the one thing all people most want to avoid: "the power of death," and to grant the one thing all most desire: to "share in His divine life," life forever.

Jesus gained His identity as King, not at our expense, but by giving His life for us. And if we want to benefit from His universal Kingship we must renounce every divisive desire -- and specifically any attempt to preserve or distinguish ourselves at the expense of others. When all who would be first are competing to be last, and all who have property refuse to defend it, and all who want to save their lives are willing to give them up for others in love for the sake of eternal life (see Matthew 5:38-48; 16: 24-26; 18:1-4), then God can grant us "the unity and peace of His Kingdom." This is what we commit ourselves to work for as we pray, O King and desire of all nations, come! Save us whom You fashioned from the dust!

**O Emmanuel,
Our King and our Law,
Long-awaited of the nations,
Savior of all,
Come! Set us free, Lord our God!**

We can understand Christmas either as a day that is different from ordinary days, or as a day which makes the ordinary days different. If we think of Christmas as a day that should be different, then the very things which make it joyful for some will make it sad for others. The presents and parties can make the poor more conscious of their poverty, the bereaved more aware of their loneliness, the depressed more discouraged by their affliction. Those unable to celebrate as others do will feel excluded.

When Jesus came, it was not a different kind of day. It was an ordinary, cold day of poverty in an oppressed country under military occupation. His parents were far from family and friends, taking temporary shelter in a stable. And after His birth they were just as homeless, poor and oppressed as they were before. If any celebrations were going on in Bethlehem that night, Mary and Joseph were not included.

Only one thing changed for Joseph and Mary that night: from then on, Jesus was with them. In their poverty they could look at Him and say, "Emmanuel -- God is with us." In loneliness and pain they could say, "God is with us." Under oppression they could say, "God is with us." And that is all. Nothing was changed, but everything was changed. Their days were like every other day, except that now they could say, "Emmanuel -- God is with us."

In our work-and-results oriented world, we can forget the value mere presence has. Or perhaps we can appreciate how much the presence of other people means to us -- people whom we love -- while appreciating God only for what He does. It is a comfort when we are sick or in sorrow just to have friends standing by us. But if we ask God to heal us, or take away what afflicts us, and He doesn't, we feel He is doing nothing for us. What is God's mere presence worth? What does it mean that He is "with us"?

When we recognize Jesus as "Emmanuel" it is just His presence to us that we focus on. But awareness of His presence can transform our lives. If He is with us in our poverty, poverty is not demeaning: God shares it with us. If He is with us in sickness or sorrow or bereavement, we are not simply delivered over to misfortune: God is with us. If He is with us in our act of dying, then our passage from this earth is just another moment in God's continual creation of us: He is with us in our dying just as much as in our being born or living.

And if we keep ourselves aware that Jesus is with us in everything we do, then He Himself becomes the guiding light, the model, the personal, incarnate "Law" that directs all our actions. In our life at home, all our dealings with one another become sacramental: signs of love and caring given to help the whole family grow in grace. In our social life, everything passes to another plane of meaning and ideals. If we go to work conscious that Jesus is with us and within us, going out to others in us, "not to be served but to serve" (Matthew 20:28; John 13:15), our whole motivation changes. If in our political involvement we are conscious that Jesus Christ is trying in us "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together into unity under His headship," then our civic goals will not be selfish and partisan, but aimed at the common good of all peoples, continuing the mission of Jesus-Emmanuel, the "long-awaited of the nations" and "Savior of all."

The Opening Prayer invites us to contemplate the birth of Jesus and to see God coming "to live among us" as the divine model of human life, the living Law, who frees us from earth-bound ideals and encourages us to believe every minute in God's presence, friendship, "forgiveness and mercy." To Him we pray, Come Emmanuel! Set us free, Lord our God!