

Advent – O Antiphons

As most Catholics know, the last week of Lent is highlighted by special liturgies we know as the “Triduum.” In like manner but less well-known, the last week of Advent also has a distinguishing characteristic – what are known as the “O” Antiphons. But, like most things in the Church’s life, this characteristic of Advent did not happen overnight, but became a practice in the celebration of Advent over the course of time.

During the early centuries, Christians, particularly those in monastic life, began reciting/singing the psalms of the Old Testament as a daily practice. The most important prayer times were morning and evening, the evening generally known as vespers (from the Latin for evening). This practice came to be formalized by the Church and is known as the Liturgy of the Hours.

Psalms were normally a response to a specific reading of significance in the Church’s life. Many of us are familiar with one of these special scripture readings, namely the special praise to Mary known as the “Magnificat.” Over the course of time, the Magnificat began to be recited in the seven days leading up to the great feast of Christmas.

Since psalms were part of their daily prayer, monks began to associate certain psalms of the Old Testament with Mary and the birth of Christ. They were selected because they were considered biblical predictions of the Christ’s coming. In this way, they were recognizing the Old Testament foretelling of the coming of the Christ, the Anointed One of God. About the 8th century, they began to associate these specific psalms as a prelude (or antiphon) to singing the Magnificat. Thus, a particular psalm and the Magnificat were sung in the seven days immediately before Christmas. These seven psalms came to be known as the “O” antiphons.

The singing of these antiphons and the Magnificat during evening Vespers were considered of such importance that the great bell of each abbey (monastery) was solemnly rung and the antiphons proclaimed by the Abbot. The first word(s) of each antiphon was considered a specific predictor of Christ’s coming. They are: **O Wisdom, O Sacred Lord, O Flower of Jesse, O Key of David, O Radiant Dawn, O King of Nations, O Emmanuel (God with Us)**. Interestingly, after the evocative “O”, the first character of the word as sung in Latin formulates the

acrostic “SARCORE” which in inverse order (Ero Cras) becomes another Latin predictor for Christ: “Tomorrow I Will Come.”

While these antiphons became a distinctive part of the Advent vespers service, they also became equally distinctive in the celebration of Mass for each of the seven days preceding the celebration of Christmas. It became a practice to include the particular “O” antiphon of the day as the acclamation before the reading of the Gospel.

Again, to mark the significance of these antiphons, the abbey manuscripts containing the antiphons and Magnificat highlighted their importance by marking the first character of the Latin word in elaborate script form (**see below**). Over the course of time, these antiphons have also been the subject of magnificent choral pieces and artwork. If you click on this link below, you will launch a video of a choral group singing the antiphons.

[The O Antiphons - YouTube](#)

As the Church is now global, it will be fascinating to discover how the many different cultures will adapt, musically and artistically, the “O” Antiphons.

- Deacon Bartholomew J. Merella, M.T.S.

References: Celebrating the Season of Advent: Eltin Griffin, O.Carm / The Liturgical Year: Adolf Adam / The Origins of the Liturgical Year: Thomas Talley

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L O KING
of the Gentiles, God of Israel
and his Saviour, chief
Corner-stone, which mak-
est both one: come Thou
and save Thy creatures
whom Thou didst fashion
from the dust of the earth.