

# PRAYING THE O ANTIPHONS

*Reflections for Advent*



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The O Antiphons are prayed during Vespers from December 17 to December 23. Rooted in imagery from the Old Testament, each antiphon begins with the word “O,” followed by a title for the Messiah and a petition for him to come and save the people of God by fulfilling the Scriptures.

This free ebook includes theological reflections written by past and present staff members of the McGrath Institute for Church Life, as well as the theology department of the University of Notre Dame. Either individually or with a group, ponder the reflections as you prepare your heart during these final Advent days for the coming of Christ.

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# INTRODUCTION

## NAMING THE NEWBORN

Timothy O'Malley

The act of naming is extraordinarily important. Expectant parents prepare for months to find a name for their child. In the moments after birth, when the parents speak this name to the newborn whom they can see face-to-face for the first time, more than an act of denomination occurs. All of the preparation, all of the joys and fears that mark parenthood, are embodied in this first proclamation of the name. And the child we could only imagine in utero gazes into our eyes (at least after a week or so) and hears his or her name called. A name that will very soon embody the history that we have with this child.

Each December 17, the Church begins to sing the O Antiphons during Vespers. The precise origin of these antiphons is unknown, although we are aware that they had entered the Roman liturgy by the eighth century. Further, when viewed as a reverse acrostic, the titles for the Messiah in these antiphons spell out in Latin E.R.O. C.R.A.S. or “Tomorrow, I will come.”

The Latin-rite Church acknowledges the importance of these antiphons in our final preparations for the Christmas season.

**December 17**

*O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti,  
attingens a fine usque ad finem,  
fortiter suaviter disponensque omnia:  
veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.*

*O Wisdom, O holy Word of God,  
you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care.  
Come and show your people the way to salvation.*

**December 18**

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,  
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,  
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:  
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

*O sacred Lord of ancient Israel,  
who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush,  
who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:  
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.*

**December 19**

*O Radix Jesse, qui stas in signum populorum,  
super quem continebunt reges os suum,  
quem gentes deprecabuntur:  
veni ad liberandum nos, jam noli tardare.*

*O Flower of Jesse's stem,  
you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples;  
kings stand silent in your presence;  
the nations bow down in worship before you.  
Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.*

**December 20**

*O Clavis David, et sceptrum domus Israel:  
qui aperis, et nemo claudit; claudis, et nemo aperit:  
veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris,  
sedentem in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

*O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel  
controlling at your will the gate of heaven:  
come, break down the prison walls of death  
for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death;  
and lead your captive people into freedom.*

**December 21**

*O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et sol justitiae:  
veni, et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.*

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

**December 22**

*O Rex gentium, et desideratus earum,  
lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum:  
veni, et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti.*

*O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart;  
O Keystone of the mighty arch of man,  
come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.*

**December 23**

*O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer noster,  
expectatio gentium, et Salvator earum:  
veni ad salvandum nos Domine Deus noster.*

*O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver,  
desire of the nations, Savior of all people,  
come and set us free, Lord our God.*

But how does the chanting of short antiphons really prepare one for the birth of Christ celebrated at Christmas? We must return to our initial reflection on the act of naming. On Christmas night, we celebrate the nativity of Jesus, the enfleshment of the Word, the wonder of the Logos emptying himself in the cooing of the Infant. We celebrate the light that shines into the darkness, the possibility that through this light, we ourselves might become pregnant with the Word of God. We celebrate God's definitive entrance into history, transforming forever what it means to proclaim peace to people of good will. We celebrate God's revelation of a name, a name bestowed once in the burning bush in Exodus and now completed in the gift of the Child named Jesus.

The O Antiphons thus prepare us to say this name properly on Christmas night—to form our vision so that we can gaze at the Child swaddled in a manger and see the depths of divine love manifested in the humility of the Infant. The Child is Wisdom itself; the Child is our Lord; the Child is the Root of Jesse, the Key of David, the Dayspring from on high, the King of the nations, Emmanuel—God with us.

In this collection, we will provide a small reflection on each of the O Antiphons so that on Christmas, we can see in the Infant the Savior of the world; so that on Christmas, Christ comes to be born not only in the crèche, not only in the readings proclaimed, but also in the heart of each Christian who sings out: *Hodie Christus natus est*. Today is born Christ, our Savior. So happy Advent, dear friends. Keep faithfully these 'Os' in your final days of preparation that you may name Jesus anew on Christmas.



DECEMBER 17

# O SAPIENTIA

Jessica Mannen Kimmet

*O Wisdom, O holy Word of God,  
you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care.  
Come and show your people the way to salvation.*

Some of my favorite scriptural passages are from the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. As an aspiring feminist, I love the portrayal of the divine in feminine terms. Even more, though, I love the ardent love for Wisdom evident in the writer's words:

For in her is a spirit  
intelligent, holy, unique,  
Manifold, subtle, agile,  
clear, unstained, certain,  
Not baneful, loving the good, keen,  
unhampered, beneficent, kindly,  
Firm, secure, tranquil,  
all-powerful, all-seeing,  
And pervading all spirits,  
though they be intelligent, pure and very subtle.  
For Wisdom is mobile beyond all motion,  
and she penetrates and pervades all things by reason of her purity.  
For she is an aura of the might of God  
and a pure effusion of the glory of the Almighty;  
therefore nought that is sullied enters into her.  
For she is the refulgence of eternal light,  
the spotless mirror of the power of God,  
the image of his goodness. (Wisdom 7:22b–26)

The writer is *gushing* over this Wisdom with whom he's fallen in love, and could clearly go on and on about the beauty he's found in her. She is portrayed as a teacher, a lover, a leader. She brings light where there is darkness; she co-creates with God; she renews and protects the world.

We find many striking similarities between these words and the descriptions of Jesus in the New Testament. He, too, is teacher, lover, leader, light-bringer, co-creator, renewer, protector, and on and on. The love the Old Testament author has for Wisdom is related to the love the New Testament writers have for Christ. This love is expressed in many of the same terms; Paul's epistles even refer to Christ as the Wisdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 1:24, 30). This title, as today's O Antiphon makes clear, is closely connected to the more-familiar name for Christ as the Word of God. In the person of Christ, the feminine figure of Wisdom from the Old Testament is united with a male human nature. The second Person of the Trinity, the One for whose coming we pray during this Advent season, holds together the masculine and feminine that we are often too quick to separate. Christ breaks down our stereotypes, reminding us that God is more unlike than like any of the images or names we give God.

We see this in today's O Antiphon: Wisdom, Christ, governs *and* cares for creation, strong *and* tender. The language reminds me of Notre Dame's Alma Mater, *Notre Dame Our Mother*, in which we sing of Mary as "tender, strong, and true." In Mary, the Mother of Christ, we see human wisdom embodied; we already see tenderness and strength held together and lived out in a single person. Things that are opposites are no longer held in opposition. It is no wonder that her Son, divine Wisdom incarnate, is also a living reconciliation, and is the One to guide us to the light of salvation.



DECEMBER 18  
**O ADONAI**

Carolyn Pirtle

*O sacred Lord of ancient Israel,  
who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush,  
who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain:  
come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.*

The Messianic title “Adonai” contains within it an aura of mystery that cannot be easily unpacked. Even the ancient Church had difficulties pinning down its exact meaning; rather than try to translate it into Latin, the writers retained the Hebrew title for this particular antiphon:

*O Adonai, et Dux domus Israel,  
qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti,  
et ei in Sina legem dedisti:  
veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.*

Most frequently translated as “Lord,” the word “Adonai” was used by the people of Israel as a substitute for the unutterable name of God, revealed to Moses from the burning bush. When the Hebrew people spoke the title “Adonai,” they did so out of reverence for God, for the very name of God, for the One who said to Moses, “I am the God of your father . . . the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob” (Exodus 3:6a). When Moses heard these words, Scripture says, he “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exodus 3:6b).

How astonishing it is that the same God from whom Moses hid his face would choose to redeem us by “[revealing] his sacred face” in Jesus—by becoming an infant, One on whom shepherds gazed in rapt wonder.

How incredible it is that this God—Adonai—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, would come to deliver us not from the hands of Pharaoh but from our sins, from death itself. How marvelous it is that this same God who spoke from the burning bush and lay wordless in a manger continues to humble himself even further, coming to his people under the appearance of bread and wine each and every time the Mass is celebrated.

Yet how often do we speak the titles “Lord” or “God” out of reverence, as a prayer of gratitude for this divine work of redemption, as St. Thomas did when he encountered the risen Christ and cried out, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28)? How often instead do we use these titles casually, or worse, as expressions of frustration or anger? As we move ever closer to Christmas, when Adonai will be revealed in an infant and called by the name Jesus, perhaps we can cultivate within our hearts a renewed reverence for the name of him who is our Lord and God, and resolve henceforth to speak his name only out of the deepest gratitude and love.



DECEMBER 19

# O RADIX JESSE

Aimee Shelide-Mayer

*O Flower of Jesse's stem,  
you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples;  
kings stand silent in your presence;  
the nations bow down in worship before you.  
Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid.*

Radix. Radical.

Get to the root of the matter.

Dig deep.

Root it out.

O Radix Jesse:

Reminding us to go deep

call deep

fall deep

in love with the God who makes all things  
new.

New life.

Budding on old branch.

Budding with new life:

Green on gray.

Newness on old.

Fresh blossom on stump,

symbol of life past

and life to come.

Fresh virgin, budding with life,

symbol of life past

and life to come.

*Isaiah 'twas foretold it,  
The Rose I have in mind;  
With Mary we behold it,  
The Virgin Mother kind.*

Miracles of stories told  
repeated anew.

Virgin maiden, bears a son—  
in her young, unknown stage.

Barren relatives bear as well—  
in older, “past-that-time” age.

Boundaries? Limits? Improbabilities?  
Our God is bigger than that.  
—Yet smaller too,  
the size of a bud, in fact.

*Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming  
From tender stem hath sprung!  
Of Jesse's lineage coming,  
As seers of old have sung.*

And we sing too—  
we the ones who know not the lineage  
as we know the now—  
aware of the need for a springing forth  
Here.  
Now.  
For all time.

Into the cold, unknown.  
Bright flower,  
against cold winter skies.

New light—breaking into darkness.  
Dark night, no longer dark.

Light enters dark—and light and dark are one.

The night becomes warm,  
the air smells sweet.

The small blossom, so strong,  
and yet, so weak.

Born in time, yet promised from all ages.

Roots that run deep,  
deeper than the oldest foundation  
deeper in the earth than the stars are in the sky.

This rosebud—image for us all.

We are to imitate and protect—  
become vulnerable and embody:  
The Strong made weak, and weak...strong.  
Living radical lives that reflect this

one

life

sent to save us all...

*When half-spent was the night.*



## DECEMBER 20

# O CLAVIS DAVID

Anthony Pagliarini

*O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel  
controlling at your will the gate of heaven:  
come, break down the prison walls of death  
for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death;  
and lead your captive people into freedom.*

“Wise men at their end know dark is right.” From death, there is no escape, and the wiser of us, writes the poet Dylan Thomas, “do not go gentle into that good night... [but] rage, rage against the dying of the light.” Against the horizon of one’s finitude and the inevitability of the grave, it seems that one must “burn and rage at end of day.” After all, “a live dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4).

At times, the Old Testament speaks peacefully of the grave. It is said of Abraham that he “died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life” (Genesis 25:8). Elsewhere, though, in the stoic lament of Ecclesiastes and the passion of Psalms, we see death as the harrow it is. “The dead know nothing... [and] never more have any share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). And so we hear David ask rhetorically, and painfully, “Do you work wonders for the dead? Will the shades stand and praise you?” (Psalm 88:11).

In the mystery of the Incarnation, Jesus answers these words with a surprising “Yes!” Christ indeed does “not go gentle into that good night,” but his “burn and rage at end of day” is not the defiant hurrah! of the Greek hero. It is, rather, the harrowing of the death itself. “I died, and behold I am alive for evermore” (Revelation 1:18). Christ enters the door of the tomb that “through death he might render powerless him who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

In what Simon Tugwell calls “the omnipotent weakness of God,” Christ’s entry into “that good night” is victorious. It is the answer to the prayer heard in today’s antiphon: *veni, et educ vinctum de domo carceris, sedentem in tenebris. Come, and lead forth from his prison the captive who sits in the shadows.*

The reality of this finds expression in the words *O Clavis David* (O Key of David). King David is himself a type of Christ, and his kingdom a prefigurement of the heavenly one. To speak of Christ as the “Key of David” is to ascribe to Christ the prerogative of granting entry to the “kingdom of [his] Father” (Matthew 26:29; cf. Isaiah 22:22). And since it is sin and death which separates humanity from this kingdom, this title means to speak of Christ as the one who “[has] the keys to Death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18). It is he who “has the key of David” and “who opens and no one shall shut” (Revelation 3:7).

But what good is it to open the door of the tomb unless Jesus also says to us “Come out!” (Luke 11:43)? As God, Christ himself cannot remain in the grave, but us—“Who can deliver his [own] soul from the power of Sheol?” (Psalm 89:48). To be led forth from the prison, Christ, the Key of David, must open himself to us as well. And in the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross (cf. John 19:34), we see opened the One who said of himself, “I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture” (John 10:9).



# DECEMBER 21

# O ORIENS

Megan Shepherd

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

For five years, my morning commute took me along Lakeshore Drive in Chicago at the crack of dawn. As I made my way south, the lake stretched out to my left—some mornings calm and still like glass, and other days windswept whitecaps and waves crashing upon the shore. Over the course of the year there were a few precious weeks when I could watch the sun rise over the lake.

Slowly, the sky lightens—the first hints brightening in the sky. I begin to see more clearly the details of things around me, as the all-encompassing darkness fades to a mixture of shadows and light. The sky begins to reflect a splendor of color and then, the first rays begin to peek over the horizon.

The light now shines freely across the water, bathing the city in its radiant glow as everything takes on a hint of reflected glory. As the sun rises above the surface of the lake, the reflected rays in the water are almost like a path leading me directly toward the light. All too quickly, the sun rises above the horizon and the day begins. The gentle expectant glow fades into the routine of daily life, yet I carry with me the memory of hopeful splendor.

On this day we pray *O Oriens, O Dayspring, O Radiant Dawn!* From the darkness of the shadow of death we yearn for the Light of Christ, who is Light of the World.

Moving through Advent, the days grow shorter as darkness appears to be overwhelming our world. Until today—the Winter Solstice, the day with the least amount of sunlight—when we proclaim the dawning of Christ’s light into our lives. From this day forward, we look to the light that shines in the darkness,

...because of the tender mercy of our God by which the daybreak from on high will visit us, to shine on those who sit in darkness and in death’s shadow, to guide our feet into the path of peace. (Luke 1:78–79)

Each morning we encounter anew the dawning of Christ’s love in our lives. Jesus’ light, the eternal light, shines forth in our lives at all times, yet is sometimes hidden from our view by the obstacles, attitudes, actions, and circumstances that cast a shadow upon our lives. In praying *O Oriens* we call for the light to break through like the dawn.

During Advent, in the shortest of days when darkness seems to be winning the battle outside and the shadow of death seems to be creeping into our hearts, the Morning Star, the Dayspring, the Light of Life, the Sun of Justice, shines forth.

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom  
a light has shone. (Isaiah 9:1)



DECEMBER 22

# O REX GENTIUM

Leonard DeLorenzo

*O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart;  
O Keystone of the mighty arch of man,  
come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust.*

In his Apostolic Letter announcing the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI recalled St. Augustine, who taught that “[believers] strengthen themselves by believing” (*Porta Fidei*, §7). To mark the Church’s Year of Faith (2012–13), I asked the Lord to find a blocked area in my own belief so that he might open it as a door to deeper faith. It did not take long for that area of little faith to be shown to me: Eucharistic adoration.

The first time I experienced Eucharistic adoration was at World Youth Day in Toronto (2002). Our group walked into an expansive yet dimly lit hall with an illuminated stage at its center. In time, I found myself kneeling alongside my companions as a priest in resplendent vestments processed through the space carrying a glistening, radiant monstrance. As he drew near, some around me were overcome with emotion and collapsed to the floor; others wept. I was nervous and more than a little uncomfortable. I wanted to leave.

I never had an urge to go back to adoration. Clearly, it was not for me. I did not want to be overcome, I did not want to weep, and I certainly did not want to feel like I had to. While I did find myself in adoration spaces several times over the next ten years, it was always as part of a retreat or some other such occurrence—it was never because of my own desire. In truth, I rather avoided adoration, even explaining to others that it “just wasn’t part of my spirituality.”

It's not that I did not place my trust in the Eucharist; I just shied away from the devotional practice of adoring the Blessed Sacrament. I knew, however, that entering into deeper communion in the Mass required, in part, an ever-deeper contemplation of Christ's Eucharistic presence. I also knew that the basic posture for faith is always humility, and that the willingness to chance having been wrong in the past unlocks the possibility for growth in the future. I felt drawn to humble myself before my previous conclusions, so I committed to going to Eucharistic adoration for thirty minutes every week during the Year of Faith. Even if I couldn't produce stronger belief on my own, I would at least show up.

Once a week, I walked across Notre Dame's campus to a small chapel where I sat silently before a consecrated Host exposed in a gold monstrance and flanked by half a dozen candles. This quiet little space is remarkably different from that large warehouse in Toronto, except for the gold monstrance and the Host contained within it. I went to sit there weekly, mostly without expectation.

When my eyes were opened and I looked up, the only thing that caught my attention besides the Blessed Sacrament was a tapestry of John baptizing Jesus—a replica of the one in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. This now-familiar image was simply there for me for the first two months of my visits, but after several months, the tapestry either showed me something about Eucharistic adoration that I did not expect, or else the grace of Eucharistic adoration presented the tapestry to me in a new way. In the image, Jesus is kneeling, not John. I began to wonder who was adoring whom.

In Toronto, it seemed all too evident what Eucharistic adoration meant: we were to melt spectacularly into a puddle of emotions and tears before the One held above us. Strangely, though, the Host had been silent, and it only moved as it was moved by the priest.

In the little adoration chapel, there was no show, no spectacle; there was the silence of the Host resting upon the altar. It is the same silence, I suppose, that was at the center of that activity in Toronto, yet here it is more audible. I did not hear it at first, but seeing Jesus kneeling before John tuned my ears, or else confirmed what I was already hearing.

And what does this silence say?

Well, I first came to sit in silence before this silence because I believed that,

The LORD is God, the mighty God,  
the great king over all the gods,  
He holds in his hands the depths of the earth  
and the highest mountains as well.  
He made the sea; it belongs to him,  
the dry land, too, for it was formed by his hand. (Psalm 95:3–5)

I pray this psalm with the Church every morning. I have come to believe that this is my God, my King, the cornerstone of my life and the joy of my heart, the One who fashioned me from dust. With these words having already become my own in some measure, the silence of the Host could now begin to speak to my heart, to teach me again how mightiness works and what power is for this King whom I praise.

Come, then, let us bow down and worship,  
bending the knee before the LORD, our maker,  
For he is our God and we are his people,  
the flock he shepherds. (Psalm 95:6–7)

I have been sitting before the Almighty who has made himself subject to me—this King who kneels before his subject. The beloved Son who knelt before John now kneels in silence awaiting my blessing. This is not the suspension of his kingship, but its revelation; it is not the absence of his glory, but its manifestation.

To him, I am more than I supposed myself to be. Yet, I am not dignified in my own right, but precisely because he kneels before me. In this is the wondrous exchange in which “eternal life is promised to us by the humility of the Lord, who bowed himself down to our pride” (Augustine, *Confessions* I.9.17). He values us enough to patiently persuade us, rather than swiftly overpower us. He bends down low so that no one will be below his love.

For a child is born to us, a son is given to us. (Isaiah 9:5a)

This Child did not stand for us to fall at his feet; rather, he fell three times to lift us up from our pride. He did not overcome us with his fullness; rather, he wept with us for the sake of our redemption. He did not appoint himself with fine linens so as to elicit our attention; rather, he allowed himself to be stripped, clinging to nothing save the Spirit he would give to us. The One who came as a child did not hold himself up in regal brilliance; rather, he was lifted up in derision, his body battered and bruised.

And this is what I adore: the power that refuses to overwhelm and instead submits to the possibility of my adoration. He adores that possibility, and will not take the freedom he has given me to come and gaze at him. He waits, silently, for “the Father spoke one Word which was His Son, and this Word He always speaks in eternal silence, and in silence must it be heard by the soul” (John of the Cross, *Maxims on Love*).

Here, then, is the King of all the nations. His reign is the measure of all to whom power has been entrusted, of all principalities that have come or will come, of every creature that has been called into existence (Romans 8:38–39). By his silence, the King of the Blessed Sacrament asks us: *Do you give or do you take? Do you free or do you bind? Do you serve or do you consume? Do you accept or do you refuse?*

Come, let us adore.



DECEMBER 23

# O EMMANUEL

Timothy O'Malley

*O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver,  
desire of the nations, Savior of all people,  
come and set us free, Lord our God.*

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, humankind became stunningly and at times disastrously aware that we are capable of shaping history and society. Social structures that were once thought to be the result of the eternal workings of Divine Providence have been exposed as human creations (or perhaps better desecrations). Our action in history can change these structures, foster anew a sense of radical peace and justice through promotion of the common good and solidarity. Yet, there is a dark side to our awakening to the possibility that we shape history, namely, we may begin to imagine that we *alone* are the creators of history—that human ingenuity and striving can enact the fullness of justice in the world. Such an approach eliminates any sense of God acting in history. On an individual level, we embrace a rough and ready ‘atheism’ (by no means an intellectual atheism), whereby every aspect of our lives unfolds solely according to our desires, our concerns, our interests. Our career choices, our relationships become a cultivation of the self apart from community. Simultaneously, we develop a society whose only concern is growth for its own sake, unaware of any transcendent good. In the United States, should we be surprised that Congress has found itself in an impossible gridlock, an inertia made possible through arguments that unfold not according to transcendent principles of truth and goodness, but the constraints of an all-too-consuming and addictive power?

In some ways, the present social and political reality finds its corollary in eighth century B.C., in the kingdom of Israel, under the reign of Ahaz. In an attempt to save Israel from destruction, King Ahaz sought to court the king of Assyria, to enter into a political alliance,

one in which there would be an inevitable capitulation to breaking the covenant with the LORD. For the covenant that Israel made on Mount Sinai was never simply about following a series of arbitrary laws. Rather, Israel's signing of the covenant was an agreement to live their existence entirely oriented toward the transcendent LORD, toward God alone. Even when Israel begs for a king and receives Saul, the narrative is quite clear: the nation, even the king, must rely on the LORD alone. The nation cannot surrender itself to the intrigues of power, of fame, and of fortune. The nation cannot ignore the Sabbath because of how it promotes inefficient labor practices, cannot despoil the orphan and the widow to increase profits, cannot enter into treaties with foreign empires to save itself from destruction. For such sins are an implicit denial that the LORD will act anew in history, *in this day*. That all power, all possibility for life, comes from the LORD alone. It is the prophet Isaiah (read with such frequency during this season of Advent), who speaks against Ahaz. In his classic text *The Prophets*, Abraham Heschel writes:

A gulf was separating prophet and king in their thinking and understanding. What seemed to be a terror to Ahaz was a trifle in Isaiah's eyes. The king, seeking to come to terms with the greatest power in the world, was ready to abandon religious principles in order to court the emperor's favor. The prophet who saw history as the stage for God's work, where kingdoms and empires rise for a time and vanish, perceived a design beyond the mists and shadows of the moment. (83)

It is within this context that the prophet Isaiah announces God's action in history through the birth of a child. The prophet writes:

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz:  
Ask for a sign from the LORD, your God;  
let it be deep as Sheol, or high as the sky!  
But Ahaz answered, "I will not ask! I will not tempt the LORD!"  
Then he said:  
Listen, house of David!  
Is it not enough that you weary human beings?  
Must you also weary my God?  
Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign;  
the young woman, pregnant and about to bear a son,  
shall name him Emmanuel. (Isaiah 7:10–14)

The birth of the child is remarkable for two reasons. First, one should note that this birth is by no means ordinary, precisely because the child to be born is to carry out the LORD's desires for the nations. The child is a sign of God acting in history, of the refusal of the LORD to let humanity construct an order forgetful of the covenant. This child, so small, still in utero, will defeat nations precisely in orienting his existence entirely to the LORD. Second, and relatedly, the name of the child is to be Emmanuel, God with us. Despite Ahaz's (and thus the entire nation's) attempt to construct his own history, the LORD continues to dwell with Israel; the LORD does not forget, does not give up his end of the covenant. The salvation of Israel remains deeply entrenched in the mind of the LORD. Something novel, unimaginable will take place:

But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,  
and from his roots a bud shall blossom.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:  
a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
A spirit of counsel and of strength,  
a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1–2)

Thus, when in the final O Antiphon, the Church proclaims that the Infant born in Bethlehem, Jesus, is Emmanuel, God with us, we make a remarkable claim. This Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, is the very sign of God dwelling among us. This Child, so small, so devoid of power, is the Creator of the stars of night, the Savior of the world. God's definitive action in history is revealed not in pomp and circumstance but in the poverty of an Infant, who will give himself over to the will of the Father, even unto death itself. The presence of this Infant, who will reign upon the wood of the Cross, is a constant sign that we are not the sole creators of history. In fact, the accomplishments of history are a shadow of this hidden event in Bethlehem, one that transforms what it means to be human, to function as a society. As Benedict XVI wrote in an editorial for the *Financial Times* during his pontificate:

In Italy, many crib scenes feature the ruins of ancient Roman buildings in the background. This shows that the birth of the child Jesus marks the end of the old order, the pagan world, in

which Caesar's claims went virtually unchallenged. Now there is a new king, who relies not on the force of arms, but on the power of love. He brings hope to all those who, like himself, live on the margins of society. He brings hope to all who are vulnerable to the changing fortunes of a precarious world. From the manger, Christ calls us to live as citizens of his heavenly kingdom, a kingdom that all people of good will can help to build here on earth.

The Christian, therefore, who adores Emmanuel, who proclaims the O Antiphon on this day, announces the newness of history as it unfolds in Christ. A history in which human love is transfigured through the self-gift of the Christ, the anointed One, the Messiah who announces the radical reign of divine justice.

As we celebrate the feast of Christmas, we must learn to give up self-sufficiency, the attempt to seize and control our own lives at all costs, to construct our own political order apart from any transcendent source. And instead, we must give ourselves over to the logic of love revealed in the poverty of the Infant. We cannot sentimentalize the presence of the birth of Jesus on Christmas day, for sentimentality ignores the historical magnitude of this birth, in which all human power—all attempts to construct our own historical narrative apart from the LORD of all nations—is defeated by the cooing of the Word made flesh.

*Come and set us free, Lord our God.*

