The “O” Antiphons

The Magnificat antiphons in the Roman Liturgy of the Hours for the Last Week in Advent (December 17-23) are traditionally referred to as the “O” Antiphons. They date from sometime before the eighth century and give voice to the quickening urgency of the fulfillment of the hopes of the prophets in Christ’s coming in Bethlehem and at the end of time.

They are referred to as the “O” Antiphons because of the first word of the seven titles of 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 Dawn of the East), O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations), and O Emmanuel (O “God is with us”).
Origin
According to Fr. William P. Saunders, "The exact origin of the O Antiphons is not known. Boethius (480–524) made a slight reference to them, thereby suggesting their presence at that time [the sixth century]. At the Benedictine Fleury Abbey these antiphons were recited by the abbot and other abbey leaders in descending rank, and then a gift was given to each member of the community. By the eighth century, they are in use in the liturgical celebrations in Rome. The usage of the O Antiphons was so prevalent in monasteries that the phrases, "Keep your O" and "The Great O Antiphons" were common parlance. One may thereby conclude that in some fashion the O Antiphons have been part of our liturgical tradition since the very early Church." ¹

The Hymn
The most popular Advent hymn expanding upon these antiphons is, of course O Come, O Come Emmanuel. The first five verses of the Latin text (Veni, veni, Emmanuel) date from the Psalteriolum Cantionum Catholicarum (Cologne, 1710) and was sung to a fifteenth century French tune. The text was expanded by Jospeh Hermann Mohr in his Cantiones Sacrae in 1878 to include all seven of the “O” antiphons.

The most popular English translation was provided by John Mason Neal in Hymns Ancient and Modern (1861).

It might be noted that O Come O Come Emmanuel is an appropriate hymn not only during the final days of Advent, but even in the first weeks of the season, as “our minds and hearts are led to look forward to Christ’s second coming at the end of time.” ² Indeed, all seven antiphons are equally applicable to the coming of Christ in Bethlehem or to his return in glory at the end of time.

² Universal Norms on the Liturgical Year and Calendar, no. 39.
December 17
O Sapientia (O Wisdom)
The first antiphon recalls the prophecy of Isaiah, who wrote of the Messiah: “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, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord…” and who exclaims: “wonderful is his counsel, and great his wisdom.”

The antiphon also notably describes the Messiah as “coming forth from the mouth of the Most High,” which resonates with the prologue of the Gospel of John, which proclaims Christ as the Word made flesh.

December 18
O Adonai (O Lord)
Adonai is the name used in the Old Testament out of respect to the sanctity of God’s name. Thus, Isaiah refers to the coming Messiah as “the Lord,” the judge, ruler and king who will save us. Thus the antiphon recalls the full course of salvation history from Moses to David to the hope of the prophets.

December 19
O Radix Jesse (O Flower of Jesse’s Stem)
As Micah prophesies that the Messiah will come from the house of David (Jesse is the father of David) and be born in David’s city of Bethlehem, so Isaiah predicts that “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse” and that "On that day, the root of Jesse [shall stand] as a signal for the peoples…”

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3 Isaiah 11:2-3.
5 Cf. Exodus 3:2 and 24:12.
6 Cf. Isaiah 33:22.
7 Cf. Micah 5:2.
8 Isaiah 11:1
9 Isaiah 11:10.
December 20
O Clavis David (O Key of David)
The one who opens and shuts, the holder of “the key of the house of David”\(^{10}\) is also the one who will open the eyes of the blind and bring out prisoners from their confinement.\(^{11}\) He is the one who hold “the keys of death and the netherworld”\(^{12}\)

December 21
O Oriens (O Radiant Dawn)
The coming of the Messiah is like the rising of the sun in the East, indeed the Lord will return upon a cloud in the East to judge the living and the dead and “the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in its wings.”\(^{13}\) For on that day we will say that “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; Upon those who lived in a land of gloom a light has shone.”\(^{14}\)

December 22
O Rex Gentium (O King of All The Nations)
As Isaiah foretold: “a child is born for us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulders dominion rests. They shall name him Wonder-Counsellor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.”\(^{15}\)

December 23
O Emmanuel (O “God with us”)
Emmanuel means God is with us. He was incarnate of the Virgin Mary in order to bring us salvation and he will be with us at the end of time as a judge of the living and the dead. For it was promised us that “the Lord himself will give you a sign, the young woman pregnant and about to bear a son, shall name him Emmanuel.”\(^{16}\)

\(^{10}\) Isaiah 22:22.

\(^{11}\) Cf. Isaiah 42:7.

\(^{12}\) Revelation 1:18.

\(^{13}\) Malachi 4:2.

\(^{14}\) Isaiah 9:2.

\(^{15}\) Isaiah 9:5.

\(^{16}\) Isaiah 7:14.
Optional Memorial of 
Our Lady of Loreto

Pope Francis announced on October 7 that he has entered the optional memorial of Our Lady of Loreto on the General Roman Calendar on December 10th. Until the proper liturgical texts have been translated into the various languages, the following may be used on an interim basis.

**For Mass** White vestments are worn and the antiphons and prayers for the Mass may be taken from the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Advent, Option two. The readings for the Mass are taken *ad libitum* from the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the *Lectionary for Mass*. The following readings from that Common are particularly appropriate:

**First Reading** Isaiah 7:10-14; 8:10
*The virgin shall conceive and bear a son.*

R. The Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.
or:
R. O Blessed Virgin Mary,
you carried the Son of the eternal Father.

**Gospel Acclamation** Cf. Luke 1:28
Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you;
blessed are you among women.

**Gospel** Luke 1:26-38
*Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son.*

**For the Liturgy of the Hours**, the Psalmody of the day is used while other elements may be taken from the the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The concluding prayer is taken from the Collect at Mass, as discussed above.
USCCB edition of the Leccionario

The situation concerning the Spanish language Leccionario for the dioceses of the United States is confusing. This brief article attempts to explain the state of the question against the backdrop of the development of Spanish language liturgical books published for use in our country.

By virtue of the decree *Ut universi Christi* (April 2, 1964), the USCCB gave local Ordinaries the authority to permit the use of all languages spoken in their Diocese, always using liturgical books “approved by a competent territorial ecclesiastical authority of the same language…” (no. 6)

During the coming years, the USCCB approved, with the confirmation of the Holy See, six official liturgical languages for which it would produce official liturgical books. Among these were English and Spanish.

To date, the Bishops have completed bilingual USCCB editions of:

*Rito del Bautismo*

*Ritual para la Confirmación*

*Rito del Matrimonio*

*Cuidado Pastoral de los Enfermos*

*Ritual De Exequias Cristianas and Celebraciones Dominicales en Ausencia de Presbitero*

as well as the *Bendición al Cumplir Quince Años, Súplicas Contra el Poder de Las Tinieblas* and the *Rito de Bendición de una Criatura en el Vientre Materno*.

During the past year a new edition of the *Misal Romano*, complete with a pastorally helpful editorial correspondence to
the English language *Roman Missal*, has been published for use in the dioceses of the United States.

Many priests have inquired in recent months about the status of the *Leccionario* for the Dioceses of the United States. To date “there is not an approved [Spanish language] Lectionary for the USA, and the USCCB is using the Mexican Lectionary when posting daily readings. The Mexican Bishops’ Conference, however, does not use a published translation of the Bible, but rather the texts needed were directly translated from the Latin, so there is no complete Bible text where they can be found. The USCCB also uses the Psaltery from Spain for the Responsorial Psalm, though in the *Misal Romano*, tercera edición, the entrance and after Communion antiphons are taken from the Mexican translation.”

For at least the past fifteen years the USCCB has been working on a Spanish language Leccionario for the dioceses of the United States. While the Conference of Bishops has encountered numerous editorial and copyright problems, it is still pursuing this project and will produce a USCCB edition of the Leccionario in the coming years.

In the meantime, the most widely used Spanish language edition of the Lectionary in the dioceses of the United States is the Leccionarios I, II y III published by the Comisión Episcopal de Pastoral Litúrgica de la Conferencia Episcopal Mexicana (1987).
Some Final Thoughts…

November is a time for remembering and giving thanks, while December is the month of new life and light amidst the gathering darkness and cold of winter. December is also the month of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which reminds us of the great liturgical traditions of the many new and vibrant cultures which make up the Diocese of Worcester.

The Cathedral of Saint Paul has always been a parish of new immigrants, as when my great grandparents, fresh off the boat, were married here in 1884 by Father O’Sullivan. They, along with the Swedes, were part of the second wave of Irish immigrants, that followed the building of the Blackstone Canal. These “new Irish” came to live in the North End, especially since they weren’t so well accepted by the old and more well established Irish who had spread from the Green Island shanties to the tenements of Grafton Hill. The Swedes settled most famously in Quinsigamond Village, but then spread up Vernon Hill.

And so it is today, where Catholics from Ghana, the Dominican Republic, Columbia, Vietnam, Albania, Brazil and so many other countries bring their rich heritages to our local Church, each seeking to praise God in their own language and culture.

So just like those who went before us, we are called to celebrate a living Liturgy, not clinging to a past which is no more, nor longing for a future not yet within our grasp, but, in the words of Saint Paul, striving, groaning and aching for a Church where there is “no longer Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female. But where all are one in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.”

It’s a great work, and I pray that God will give us the grace to do it well.

In the Lord,

Monsignor James P. Moroney
Director