

# THE GREAT ANTIPHONS OF ADVENT



The Church celebrates the seven days before the Vigil of Christmas under the name of *Major Ferias*. The ordinary office of Advent takes on greater solemnity; the antiphons of the psalms at Lauds and at the hours of the day are appropriate to the time and have a direct connection with Advent. Every day at Vespers a solemn antiphon is sung, which is a cry to the Messiah, and in which he is given one of the titles attributed to him in Scripture.

## THE "O" ANTIPHONS

### Their place in the Advent liturgy

Each liturgical season has its own genius. The liturgy of Advent, rich in symbolism because of its spirit of penitence mingled with joy, takes on a new breadth during its last two weeks. At the very beginning of Advent, with the first Vespers, the Church had to be content with singing that she saw the Lord coming from afar (*nomen Domini venit de longinquo, ant. ad Mag.*), and a week later his coming was announced as less distant: (*ecce Dominus veniet, Int. ad Missam Dom. II Adv.*). But, from Gaudete Sunday (3rd Sunday), the Church no longer hides her impatience for the coming of her Spouse, so long awaited since the original sin.

If the penitential aspect is more pronounced during this second half of Advent, with the fasts of the Ember Days and the Vigil, so is the aspect of joyful expectation. If, during the first two weeks of Advent, the Church is content at the Matins Invitatory to sing *Regem venturum Dominum*, "come and worship the King who is to come," during the last two weeks she thinks she sees him coming already and makes us sing *prope est jam Dominus*, "the Lord is now near!" Gaudete Sunday is thus like the turning point of Advent, and it introduces the second part of it, of which the Great Antiphons are the essential aspect. It



sometimes happens that this Sunday, which always falls between December 10 and 17, coincides with the beginning of the week of the Major Ferias. The Great Antiphons are like the litur-

gical summit of this final part of Advent. According to Dom Guéranger, these antiphons "contain the whole marrow of the Advent liturgy."

Each antiphon is composed of three parts: (1) a symbolic title taken from Holy Scripture, especially the Old Testament, and applied to the Divine Child, (2) a type or figure borrowed from Holy History, such as the burning bush, which develops the title given in the first part, (3) a fervent prayer asking the Messiah to delay his coming no longer - it is the insistent repetition of this *Veni!* which gives these antiphons their character of holy impatience. They are sometimes called the Great Antiphons, because of the great solemnity which surrounds their recitation, sometimes the "O" Antiphons, or even simply the Great "O" Antiphons, because of the exclamation which precedes each invocation.

## HISTORY OF THE O ANTIPHONS

Although a text by Boethius (+525) seems to allude to these antiphons and they are found, albeit as eight, in the antiphonary attributed to Pope Gregory the Great (+604), their integration in their present place in the Roman liturgy probably dates from the Carolingian period. At least, it was at that time that they were sung at Vespers during the last week of Advent. This practice has prevailed in the Roman Church to this day.

By a decree of the Council of Toledo in 636, the Annunciation was to be celebrated eight days before Christmas. On each of the days of the Octave, an Antiphon O was sung which varied for each day and which expressed the wishes of the ancient patriarchs and prophets for the coming of the Messiah. There were therefore seven of these Antiphons, since on the day of the feast no Antiphon was sung.

Instead of the Annunciation, the Churches of Italy, and especially of Spain, celebrated on December 18 the feast of the Expectation of the Childbirth of the Blessed Virgin: *In expectatione partus beatae Mariae Virginis*. In the latter kingdom it is customary to celebrate a solemn Mass early in the morning for eight days. Pregnant women in particular hasten to attend this Mass to honour Mary's virginal pregnancy and to ask God for a happy deliverance through her intercession. The Roman Missal contains a Mass of the Expectation of Childbirth of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It does not differ in any way from the one said in honor of the Blessed Virgin during the season of Advent.

The seven antiphons assigned to the Magnificat are already found in the *Liber de ordine antiphonarii* of Amalaire of Metz (+850), and it is said of Alcuin of York (+804) that he died repeating the antiphon *O clavis David* with the Magnificat. The number of these Antiphons, which are commonly called "the O's of Advent" because they all begin with this exclamation, is thus seven in the Roman Church, one for each of the seven major Ferias, and they are all addressed to Jesus Christ. Other

Churches in the Middle Ages added two more: one to the Blessed Virgin, *O Virgo Virginum*, and one to the Angel Gabriel, *O Gabriel!* or to St. Thomas, whose feast day falls in the course of the Major Festivals. The latter begins thus: *O Thomas Didyme*. It is more modern; but from the XIII<sup>o</sup> century it replaced almost universally that *O Gabriel*.

There were even Churches which increased the number of the great Antiphons to twelve, by adding to the nine we have just mentioned, three others, namely: one to Christ, *O Rex pacific!* a second to the Blessed Virgin, *O mundi Domina!* and finally a last one in the manner of an apostrophe to Jerusalem, *O Hierusalem!* This number of twelve, according to an interpretation reported by Honoré d'Autun and Durand de Mende, would represent the twelve prophets who predicted Christ, or the twelve tribes redeemed by his blood.

## THEIR PLACE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Around the year 800, when the transformation of the morals of the peoples of the West by Christian values was well underway, we even find references to the Advent liturgy, with the Great Antiphons, in the



literature of the time. The Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf (probably to be identified with the bishop of Lindisfarne of that name), in his epic poem "Christ", deals with the two advents of Christ, and it is not difficult to discern the entire passages that are merely paraphrases of the O antiphons. Even today the faithful in various countries sing, perhaps unknowingly, these ancient antiphons whenever they sing the popular Advent hymn *Veni, veni, Emmanuel*, which is woven from the Great O's. Blessed Cardinal Newman, for his part, likes to call these antiphons the "heralds of Christmas" and sees them as the natural continuation of the feast of the Immaculate Conception. <sup>1</sup>

In the monasteries, the week of "O" is a time of great jubilation. It has become a widespread custom to grant the monks - tired by the rigours of the little Lent that is the monastic Advent - a special recreation on December 17, when the recitation of the antiphons begins.

## HOW TO SING THEM

The moment chosen to make this sublime appeal to the charity of the Son of God heard is the hour of Vespers, because it is on the evening of the world - *vergente mundi vespere*, according to the beautiful expression of the Vespers of Advent in the monastic office<sup>2</sup> - that the Messiah has come. They are sung at the Magnificat, to mark that the Saviour we await will come to us through Mary. They are sung twice, before and after the Canticle, as in the double feasts, as a sign of greater solemnity, a privilege not enjoyed in the past by the feasts or even the ordinary

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<sup>1</sup> "The Feast of her Immaculate Conception is upon us; and close upon its Octave, which is kept with special solemnities in the Churches of this town, come the great Antiphons, the heralds of Christmas. That joyful season, joyful for all of us, while it centres in Him who then came on earth, also brings before us in peculiar prominence that Virgin Mother, who bore and nursed Him. Here she is not in the background, as at Easter-tide, but she brings Him to us in her arms" (*Letter to Pusey*, p. 116).

<sup>2</sup> Hymn of the seventh century. The classicizing reform of hymns undertaken by Urban VIII (1632) did not affect the monastic offices.

Sundays. <sup>3</sup>In some places it was even customary to sing them three times, namely, before the hymn itself, before *Gloria Patri*, and after *Sicut erat*. In some places (such as the monastery of Fleury) it was customary to repeat the antiphon several times, interposing it between each verse of the Magnificat, a practice called "triumphing" the antiphon.

Exceptionally, the choir remains standing to sing them. These admirable antiphons are adorned with a song full of gravity and melody (tone 2D), which is used throughout the week each time these antiphons are repeated, which is a good way of underlining the unity of thought that guides the Church's liturgy in these last days before Christmas. The second mode of ecclesiastical chant - the mode *tristis* - is a serious and grave mode, which expresses well the spirit of loving penitence of the Church during these days. The Church will find this same mode on Christmas Eve with the introit *Dominus dixit ad me* of the midnight mass. The Magnificat is sung with great solemnity during these days. How can we not solemnize the hymn of this beautiful "Mother of holy hope" (Sir XXIV, 17), during these days when we are waiting for her to give us her Son?

The proper antiphons assigned to the various days in the breviary - such as the antiphon *Beata es Maria* for the third Sunday, when this falls on December 17 - always give way to the O antiphons. If a feast day interrupts the succession of the Major Ferias, as is the case for the feast of St. Thomas the Apostle on December 21, the corresponding antiphon is sung for the Advent memorial.

The various Churches have long retained the custom of accom-

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<sup>3</sup> Until recently, the antiphons were doubled - that is, sung in full before as well as after the psalms and gospel hymns - only on feast days of double rite. On other days, when the office was only of simple or semi-double rite, only the first words of the antiphon were recited before the psalm or hymn, reserving the full antiphon for the end. See Callewaert, *Sacris Erudiri*, 1940, pp. 179-184.

panying them with a very special pomp, whose ever expressive demonstrations vary according to place. In the abbeys where the office is solemnly celebrated, the old "O's" are sung with particular customs. The first is intoned by the abbot dressed in the pontifical vestments and at his throne, while the big bell rings and continues throughout the singing of the Magnificat. On the following days, the antiphon is intoned in order of dignity, the officiant wears the cope and stands in the middle of the choir in front of the great lectern.

## INTERPRETATION AND SPIRITUAL MEANING

The four weeks of Advent, as everyone knows, mystically represent the thousands of years during which fallen humanity awaited the promised Redeemer (Gen 3:15) who would one day come to triumph over the ancient serpent (Rev 12:9). Through successive promises renewed over the centuries with Noah, the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets, God kept the holy hope alive in the hearts of His elect.

The seven Great Antiphons, representing the aspirations of humanity during these long millennia, are sung the week before the Christmas Vigil to represent that "fullness of time" (Gal IV, 4) that God waited for before becoming incarnate. The last week of Advent is precisely the time of the Law, the last phase of holy history before the eternal covenant (Jer. XXXI). The sceptre has now gone out of Judah (Gen XLIX); Daniel's 70 weeks are almost over (Dan IX). Saint Thomas Aquinas reminds us that Christ became incarnate at the proper time, when the Roman world was at peace under Augustus (*toto Orbe in pace composito*, as the Roman Martyrology so gravely states in the office of Prime on the Christmas Vigil) and at the very time of the year when light begins to prevail over darkness (*Summa theologiae* III, Q. 35, art. 8). If Christ had become incarnate at the time of the fall of man, humanity would not have experienced sufficiently the horror of sin; if he had



delayed the Incarnation any longer, on the other hand, men would have despaired of the coming of the Messiah (III, Q. 1, arts. 5 and 6).

The number seven, to which the Roman Church has finally attached itself rather than the eight or nine or twelve antiphons of some medieval churches, is heavy with symbolic value. Just think of the holy sevenfold of the sacraments or of the infused virtues... The union of three and four is the number par excellence of the image of God. Three represents the life of the spirit, image of the Holy Trinity. Four represents matter (the four elements, the seasons, the humours). Adam was created in the image of God (Gen I, 26), and Jesus Christ, the new Adam (Rom V, 14), is "the image of the invisible God, born before every creature" (Col I, 15). On him rest the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit in fullness (Is XI, 2).

Moreover, seven is the number that represents the perfection of the divine work, because the seventh day is the day of God's rest. And Guillaume Durand (+1296) does not hesitate to say that the Church chose the number seven for the Great Antiphons to represent the expectation of those who, from the dawn of human history, manifested their hope in the Messiah to come by the respectful observance of the seventh day. This is the spiritual meaning of the Holy Septuagint, which provides the theme for the Major Advent Ferias.

Honoré d'Autun (+1157), in his allegorical commentary on the liturgy, the *Gemma animae*, links the seven "O" Antiphons to the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, as we will see later, after Dom Guéranger's commentary on each antiphon.

We have already mentioned that these antiphons take up the great biblical prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, without necessarily reproducing them verbatim, as we shall see in detail for each antiphon. It would seem that the very order of these antiphons contains

a spiritual message. When we read the series of initial letters of the antiphons, we obtain in acrostic the answer of Jesus to the prayers of his children: *Ero cras*, "I will be here tomorrow". This is like an anticipation of the liturgy of the Vigil of the Nativity, at the end of the week of the Major Serails: *Hodie scietis quia veniet Dominus et salvabit nos, et mane videbitis gloriam eius* (introit of the Mass, Ex XVI, 6 and 7). The Office repeats the expression *crastina die* several times in the Office of this day. *Ero cras*, because the next time Vespers is sung, on December 24, it will already be the Office of Christmas.

Durand de Mende, the famous thirteenth-century bishop, even thinks that he should find a spiritual meaning in the fact that the Church uses the second tone to sing all these antiphons. The Church uses the second tone for all these antiphons: "First, because each one speaks of the one and the other advent [of Christ]; second, to designate to us the two loves, that is to say, of God and of our neighbour; third, because of the double nature of Christ to whom they are addressed". And the learned liturgist continues: "All of them, then, are of the second tone, to mark that we await the Second Coming. And note that those of these antiphons which contain at the beginning expressions designating the divinity of Christ, concern those who await the first advent, such as *O Sapientia* and *O Adonai*. Now, *Adonai* signifies the Lord, because he will rule over every creature, or because every creature is subject to his rule. Those, on the other hand, which contain terms concerning his humanity, refer to those who await the second advent, as *O radix Jesse* and *O clavis David*. There are also those which designate the two natures, as *O rex gentium*, for the Son of God is called king, according to his divinity, from these words of the psalmist: *Deus, iudicium tuum regi da*, etc., "O God, give the king the righteousness of your judgment." He is also called king according to his humanity, from these

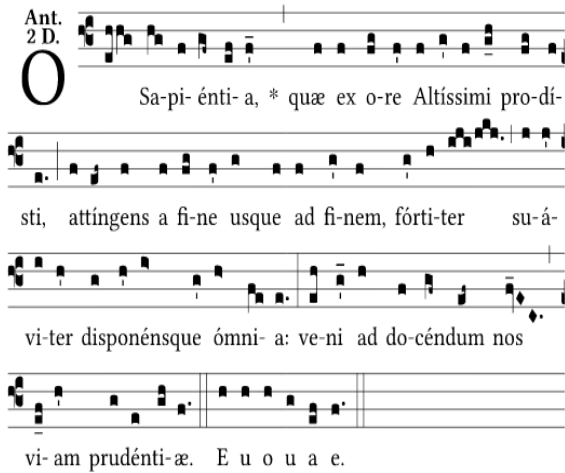
words, *Domine, in virtute tua laetabitur rex*, etc., "Lord, the king shall rejoice in thy strength." However, kingship refers in Scripture more often to his humanity, because it was according to his humanity that he was anointed with the oil of joy above his equals." While each antiphon begins with a different title, nevertheless the Church precedes each antiphon with the exclamation "O." This is an expression which, again according to Durand, "marks admiration rather than vocative."

**It is not without interest to note that the dates of the Major Holidays - from December 17 to 23 - correspond to those of the ancient celebration of the Roman Saturnalia. The liturgy thus marks the triumph of the Eternal King over ancient paganism.**

There is a progression of thought in these seven songs, the meaning of which we will see later. First we see the Son of God in his eternal life (December 17), then awaited in the Old Covenant (December 18-20), then awaited by the nations as master of nature (December 21), and Redeemer of the nations (December 22), finally as God come among us to save us (December 23). We will find this same double "moment" - manifestation to the Jews followed by manifestation to the Gentiles - with the two principal feasts of the liturgical season that is about to begin: Christmas (manifestation to the Jews in the person of the shepherds) and Epiphany (manifestation to the Gentiles in the person of the Magi).

## FIRST ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 17

Ant.  
2 D.



O Sa-pi-énti-a, \* quæ ex o-re Altissimi pro-dí-  
sti, attingens a fi-ne usque ad fi-nem, fórti-ter su-á-  
vi-ter disponénsque ómni- a: ve-ni ad do-céndum nos  
vi-am prudénti-æ. E u o u a e.

O Wisdom, who came forth from the mouth of the Most High, who reaches from one end to the other, and disposes of all things with strength and gentleness: come and teach us the ways of prudence

This antiphon is woven with references taken from the book of Proverbs II, 6, the book of Ecclesiasticus XXIV, 5, and the book of Wisdom VIII, 10. Even though the word "wisdom" in the Bible usually designates the whole of the virtues, here it must be applied to the second Person of the Trinity.

### Commentary by Dom Guéranger

O uncreated Wisdom, who will soon make yourself visible to the world, let it be clear at this moment that you are disposing of all things! Behold, by your divine permission, an edict has just been issued by the Emperor Augustus to take a census of the universe. Every citizen of the Empire must register in his native city. The prince believed in his pride that he had shaken the entire human race to his advantage. Men are agitated by the millions on the globe, and traverse in all directions the immense Roman world; they think they obey a man, and it is God whom they obey. All this great agitation has but one purpose: it is to bring to Bethlehem a man and a woman who have their humble abode

in Nazareth of Galilee; so that this woman, unknown to men and cherished by heaven, having arrived at the end of the ninth month since the conception of her son, may give birth in Bethlehem to that son of whom the Prophet said, "His coming forth is from the days of eternity; O Bethlehem! thou art not the least of the thousand cities of Jacob; for he shall also come forth from thee." How *strong* you are, O divine Wisdom, to achieve your ends in such an invincible way, though hidden from men! How gentle you are, to do no violence to their freedom! but also, how paternal you are in your foresight for our needs! You chose Bethlehem to be born in, because Bethlehem means the House of Bread. You show us that you want to be our *Bread*, our food, our nourishment of life. Nourished by a God, we will no longer die. O Wisdom of the Father, living Bread come down from heaven, come soon into us, that *we may draw near to you*, and *be enlightened* by your brightness; and give us that prudence which leads to salvation.

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According to Honoré d'Autun, this first antiphon *O Sapientia* corresponds to the gift of prudence: eternal Wisdom, by his coming, will perfect all things and teach us the "ways of prudence", as is requested in the conclusion of this antiphon, *veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae*.

## SECOND ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 18

Ant.  
2.



O Ad-o-ná-i, \* et Dux domus Isra-el, qui Mó-  
y-si in igne flammae ru-bi appa-ru-í-sti, et e-i  
in Si-na legem de-dí-sti: ve-ni ad re-diméndum nos  
in bráchi-o extén-to.

O Adonai, Lord,  
head of the house of  
Israel, who appeared  
to Moses in the flame  
of the burning bush  
and gave him the law  
on Sinai; come and  
redeem us in the  
strength of your arm.

This title is taken from the book of Exodus (III-IV); it is the title Lord that the Jews commonly used in order to avoid pronouncing the ineffable name of the eternal God. To attribute this title to Jesus Christ is to confess his divinity.

### Commentary by Dom Guéranger

O Supreme Lord! *Adonai*, come to *redeem* us, no longer in your power, but in your humility. In the past, you manifested yourself to Moses, your servant, in the midst of a divine flame; you gave the Law to your people from the midst of thunderbolts and lightning: now it is no longer a question of frightening, but of saving. That is why your most pure Mother Mary, having known, as well as her husband Joseph, of the Emperor's edict which will oblige them to undertake the journey to Bethlehem, is busy with the preparations for your happy birth. She is preparing for you, divine Sun, the humble swaddling clothes that will cover your nakedness and protect you from the cold in this world that

you have made, at the hour when you appear, in the midst of night and silence. Thus you will deliver us from the bondage of our pride, and your arm will be felt more powerful, while it will seem weaker and more immobile to men. Everything is ready, O Jesus! Your swaddling clothes are waiting for you: leave soon and come to Bethlehem to *redeem us* from the hands of our enemy.

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He is Adonai," says Honré d'Autun, "who revealed his name to Moses when he gave him the Law at Sinai, who comes to redeem us with the spirit of understanding.

### THIRD ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 19

Ant.  
2 d.

**O** Rá-dix Jéssé, \* qui stas in sígnum popu-ló-  
rum, super quem conti-nébunt réges os sú-um, quem gén-  
tes depre-ca-búntur: vé-ni ad li-be-rándum nos, jam nó-  
li tardá-re.

You are like a standard for the peoples, before whom kings will stand in silence, to whom the nations will offer their prayers: come and deliver us; delay no longer.

This invocation combines two passages from the prophet Isaiah: the one in which the Messiah, the offspring of Jesse, receives in fullness the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (Is XI) and the one in which it is said of the Messiah, in the hymns of the Suffering Servant, that "Before him kings will shut their mouths" (Is LII, 15)

**Commentary by Dom Guéranger**

So you are on your way, O sons of Jesse, to the city of your forefathers. The Ark of the Lord has risen up and is going forward, with the Lord in it, to the place of its rest. "How beautiful are your steps, O Daughter of the King, in the brightness of your shoe" (Cant. VII, 1), when you come to bring their salvation to the cities of Judah! The angels escort you, your faithful Spouse surrounds you with all his tenderness, heaven delights in you, and the earth trembles under the happy weight of its Creator and its august Queen. Go forth, O Mother of God and men, Almighty Propitiatory where is contained the divine Manna that keeps man from death! Our hearts follow you, accompany you, and, like your Royal Ancestor, we swear "not to enter our house, not to ascend our bed, not to close our eyelids, not to give rest to our temples, until we have found *in our hearts* a dwelling for the Lord whom you bear, a tent for the God of Jacob." Come, then, thus veiled under the most pure sides of the sacred Ark, O *offspring of Jesse, until* you come forth from it to shine in the eyes of the peoples, as a *standard of victory*. Then shall the vanquished kings be silent before thee, and the nations shall make their vows unto thee. Make haste, O Messiah! Come and conquer all our enemies, and *deliver us*.

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This antiphon corresponds to the gift of counsel, that gift which - following in the footsteps of wisdom and understanding - makes us understand what is more suitable for the glory of God and for our salvation. The standard of the peoples is the Cross, in which the gift of counsel makes us see the sign of our victory with Christ.

## FOURTH ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 20



Ant.  
2 D.

O cla-vis Da-vid, et sceptrum domus Isra-el;  
 qui ápe-ris, et nemo claudit; claudis, et nemo ápe-rit:  
 ve-ni, et e-duc vinctum de domo cárce-ris, sedéntem in  
 té-nebris et umbra mor-tis. E u o u a e.

O Key of David, O sceptre of the house of Israel, who openeth, and no man can shut; who shutteth, and no man can open: come, and bring forth out of the prison the captive that sitteth in darkness and in the shadow of death.

This antiphon runs through both Testaments to embroider a rich tapestry. Isaiah (XXII, 22) predicted: "I will put the key of the house of David on his shoulder, and he shall open and no one shall shut; he shall shut and no one shall open", which is fulfilled when the seer on Patmos sees "the One who has the key of David, the One who opens and no one shuts, who shuts and no one opens" (Rev III, 7), passing through other allusions such as Luke I, 79, or Ps CXLII, 9.

### Commentary by Dom Guéranger

O Son of David, heir to his throne and his power, you travel in your triumphal march through a land once subjugated by your forefather, now enslaved by the Gentiles. On every side of the road you recognize so many places that bear witness to the marvels of the justice and mercy of Jehovah your Father toward his people in the time of this ancient Covenant that is coming to an end. Soon, when the virginal cloud that covers you is removed, you will undertake new journeys on this same earth; *you will pass through it doing good, and curing all languor and*

*infirmity, and yet having no place to rest your head.* At least, today, your mother's womb still offers you a sweet and peaceful refuge, where you receive only the most tender and respectful testimonies of love. But, O Lord, you must come out of this happy retreat; you must shine, eternal Light, in the midst of darkness; for the *captive* whom you have come to deliver languishes in his prison. He sits in the shadow of death and will perish there, if you do not come quickly to open the doors with your almighty *Key!* This *captive*, O Jesus, is the human race, enslaved by its errors and vices: come and break the yoke that weighs it down and degrades it; this captive is our heart, too often enslaved to inclinations that it disavows: come, O divine Liberator, and set free all that you have deigned to make free by your grace, and raise up in us the dignity of your brothers.

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Christ is the Key of David because "he opened heaven to the righteous and closed hell, the one who comes to deliver us from prison by the spirit of strength," Honoré d'Autun continues.

## FIFTH ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 21

Ant.  
2 D.

O- ri- ens, splendor lu- cis æ- térnæ, et sol ju-  
stí-ti- æ: ve- ni, et illúmi- na sedéntes in té- nebris  
et umbra mor- tis. E u o u a e.

O Orient! splendor of eternal light! Sun of justice, come and illuminate those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

It is from the prophet Zechariah (VI, 12 and III, 8) that the expression Orient is borrowed as applied to Our Lord, although it must

also be seen as an allusion to Ps CVI, 10 (a second allusion to the nations sitting in darkness), as well as to the book of Wisdom VII, 26, where the eternal Word is described as "the shining of eternal light".

### **Commentary by Dom Guéranger**

Divine *Sun*, O Jesus! You come to rescue us from the eternal night: be forever blessed! But how much you exercise our faith, before you shine in all your splendour to our eyes! How much you love to veil your rays until the moment marked by your heavenly Father, when you must unfold all your fires! Now you are crossing Judea; you are approaching Jerusalem; the journey of Mary and Joseph is drawing to a close. On the way you meet a multitude of men going in all directions, each one going to his home town to fulfil the Edict of Enumeration. Of all these men, none suspected you so near, *O divine East!* Mary, your Mother, is esteemed by them a common woman; at most, if they notice the majesty and incomparable modesty of this august Queen, they will vaguely feel the striking contrast between so sovereign a dignity and so humble a condition; still they soon forget this happy encounter. If they see with such indifference the mother, the son not yet born to the visible light, will they give him a thought? And yet this son is you, *O Sun of Justice!* Increase in us Faith, but also increase love. If these men loved you, *O liberator of the human race*, you would make yourself felt to them; their eyes would not yet see you, but at least their hearts would be ardent in their breasts, they would desire you, and they would hasten your arrival by their wishes and their sighs. O Jesus, who thus crosses this world which you have made, and who does not force the homage of your creatures, we want to accompany you on the rest of your journey; we kiss on the earth the blessed footsteps of the one who carries you in her womb; we do not want to leave you until we have arrived with you at the happy Bethlehem, at this House of Bread, where at last our eyes will see you, *O eternal splendour, our Lord and our God!*

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Honoré d'Autun remarks on this antiphon that Christ - *Sol justitiae* - illuminates us precisely by the gift of science, thus dispelling the darkness of our intelligence.

## SIXTH ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 22

Ant.  
2.

O Rex génti- um, \* et de-si-de-rá-tus e-á-rum,  
la-písque angu-lá-ris, qui fa-cis útraque unum: ve-ni,  
et salva hómi-nem, quem de limo formá-sti.

O King of the nations, the object of their desires! Come and save the man whom you formed from the clay.

The title "King of the Gentiles" is borrowed from an oracle of Jeremiah (X:7), and in a truly universalist perspective the antiphon refers to the account of the creation of man (Gen II:7). The reference to the cornerstone is so profoundly rich that we must be content to evoke as scriptural sites Is XXVIII:16, as well as Ps CXVII:22; Acts IV:11, and Eph II:20 and verse 14 where the reconciliation of the two peoples is mentioned.

### Commentary by Dom Guéranger

O King of *nations*, you are drawing ever nearer to that Bethlehem where you are to be born. The journey is drawing to a close, and your august Mother, who is comforted and strengthened by such a sweet burden, is constantly conversing with you along the way. She adores your divine majesty, she thanks your mercy; she rejoices at having been chosen for the sublime ministry of serving as Mother to a God. She desires and fears at the same time the moment when her eyes will finally

contemplate you. How can she, who considers herself the last of all creatures, render you services worthy of your sovereign greatness? How will she dare to raise you in her arms, press you to her heart, nurse you in her mortal bosom? And yet, when she comes to think that the hour approaches when, without ceasing to be her son, you will leave her and claim all the care of her tenderness, her heart fails and maternal love is confused with the love she has for her God, she is at the moment of expiring in this too unequal struggle of weak human nature against the strongest and most powerful of all the affections united in one heart. But you support it, O *Desired One of the nations*, because you want it to reach that blessed end which will give the earth its Savior and men the *cornerstone* which will unite them in one family. Blessed are you in the wonders of your power and goodness, O divine King, and come soon to save us, remembering that man is dear to you, since you kneaded him with your hands. Oh, come, for your work is degenerate; it has fallen into perdition; death has invaded it: take it back into your powerful hands, remake it; save it; for you still love it, and you are not ashamed of your work.

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According to the *Gemma animae*, this antiphon makes us desire the gift of piety, that gift which helps us to love God and our neighbour better for God. For God is not only our God "for us", but the true *Rex gentium*, King of all peoples.

## SEVENTH ANTIPHON - DECEMBER 23

Ant.  
2.

O Emmá-nu-el, \* Rex et lé-gi-fer noster, exspe-  
ctá-ti-o génti- um, et Salvá-tor e- á-rum: ve-ni ad sal-  
vándum nos Dómi-ne De- us no-ster.

O Emmanuel,  
our King and  
Lawgiver, the  
expectation of  
the nations and  
their Saviour,  
come and save  
us, O Lord our  
God!

This antiphon, which is obviously inspired by the famous prophecy of the *Virgo concipiens* of Isaiah VII, should be read in the light of the antiphon of Lauds of that same day: *Ecce completa sunt omnia quae dicta sunt per Angelum de Virgine Maria*. At last, the times have been fulfilled! The reference to the Desired One of the nations is inspired by Haggai II:7 (like the previous antiphon, where the allusion is even clearer), with its allusion to the appearance of the Messiah at the time of the second Temple: "I will fill this house with glory," a prophecy to be fulfilled at the presentation of Jesus in the Temple at the end of the Christmas season: "my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all peoples, the light that should enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel" (Luke II:30-32). The title Legifer here comes from Isaiah, the prophet whom the Church so loves to quote during Advent that some call him the fifth evangelist. "Yahweh is our lawgiver, Yahweh is our king; he will save us" (Is XXXIII, 22.)

## Commentary by Dom Guéranger

O Emmanuel! King of Peace, you are entering Jerusalem today, the city of your choice, for there you have your Temple. Soon you will have your Cross and your Sepulchre there, and the day will come when you will establish your dreaded tribunal there. Now, you are entering this city of David and Solomon without noise or fanfare. It is only the place where you are passing through on your way to Bethlehem. However, Mary your mother and Joseph her husband do not pass through it without going up to the Temple to pay their vows and homage to the Lord, and then the oracle of the Prophet Haggai, who announced that the glory of the second Temple would be greater than that of the first, is fulfilled for the first time. This Temple, in fact, at this moment possesses an Ark of the Covenant far more precious than that of Moses, but above all incomparable to any other sanctuary than to heaven itself, because of the dignity of the One it contains. It is the Lawgiver himself who is here, and not merely the stone table on which the Law is engraved. But soon the living Ark of the Lord descends the steps of the Temple, and prepares to leave for Bethlehem, where other oracles call it. We adore, O Emmanuel, all your steps through this world, and we admire with what fidelity you observe what has been written about you, so that nothing is lacking in the characters with which you must be endowed, O Messiah, in order to be recognized by your people. But remember that the hour is near, that all things are being prepared for your Nativity, and come to save us; come, that you may be called not only Emmanuel, but Jesus, that is, Savior.

\* \* \*

This last antiphon, to finish with Honoré d'Autun the series of gifts of the Holy Spirit, obtains for us the reverential fear. Emmanuel our God is truly with us, which gives us the most perfect of motives for wishing to please Him and to avoid offending Him by sin.

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