

“O COME, O COME EMMANUEL”: EMBRACING THE FOURTH WEEK OF ADVENT

If you are among those who may struggle with how monastic life contributes to the Church, I will strongly (though respectfully) disagree. The monastic contribution to the Church has been **immense**, whether spiritually, musically and even physically. For example, the health benefits of intermittent fasting are well known as monks and nuns have practiced these austerities for centuries. As St. Peter Chrysologus once said: “*Fasting is the helm of human life and governs the whole ship of our body.*” Today, I want to highlight another contribution, namely the fostering of the **treasury** of sacred music. This year we are blessed with a full experience of Advent—no **truncated** Fourth Week with a Monday or Tuesday Christmas. We savor it all this year! My favorite part of the waning days of Advent is the praying of the **O Antiphons** during Vespers from December 17 through December 23 inclusive.

Anglicans and Lutherans also employ these historic antiphons and so they have ecumenical importance as well. Many are unaware that these **antiphons** date back to the time of Charlemagne in the 9th century! The antiphons have a **monastic** origin; after all those monks were prolific, placing a high emphasis on the liturgy, not being consumed with “lights, locks, leaks, and litter” as I am far too often. They had sufficient time for reflection and were quite creative. One verse was sung or chanted **each evening** (rather than being sung together as a single hymn, as we do today). It is possible that by the 12th century, five of the antiphons had been **combined** to form the verses of a single hymn with its refrain “*Gaude, gaude, Emmanuel nascetur pro te, Israel*” (“Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel”). Sometime between the 9th and 12th Century, the text **ceased** being sung as part of the Magnificat and became a **stand-alone** hymn. We forget that at times the text and melody originate from very **different** sources and eras.

I am grateful to our talented Cathedral music staff. **Lawrence Lawyer** and **Chris Ganza** are generous in sharing their musical and liturgical wisdom with me. Recently, I inquired about this hymn and received a treasure trove of information later that same morning, forming the basis of this column. While the text of “Veni, Emmanuel” dates to the 8th or 9th century, the melody that we sing today appears to have come later. The **oldest known** manuscript to contain this **complete series** of Latin texts is contained in a book known as an Antiphonary, held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, dating to the 9th century. It is without musical notation. In the image at the conclusion of this column, I have placed **three black arrows** at the beginnings of the verses recited on **December 17-19**: O sapiential (Wisdom); O Adonai (Lord); O Radix (root).

As we sing the hymn today, pay special attention to how the **organ** is leading us in the **proper sequencing** of the words. Call me **nit-picky**, but most people in the pews **sing this hymn incorrectly**; so have I! When placing the melody into their own hymnals, later editors converted the melody from the 4-line notation style of Gregorian Chant into the 5-line version on which modern Western music is written. It then became common to **hold the final syllable** of “Emmanuel.” The unfortunate effect of holding the note is that the text may be misinterpreted to say, “Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel!” as though Emmanuel should be the one rejoicing, and not Israel. However, the proper sense is, “Rejoice! Rejoice! (FULL STOP) Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.” Since both “Emmanuel” and “Israel” are indeclinable in Latin, the only way to tell is by how we phrase the verse. We’ve picked up a **bad habit** with this Advent hymn.

In 1966, an Augustinian canoness and musicologist named **Sr. Thomas More** (†1 May 2008) was presented with a 15th century volume once belonging to French Franciscan nuns. One text

especially **stood out** to her. “Bone Iesu dulcis cunctis,” (see inset) bore the melody known as VENI EMMANUEL. She connected the dots. Thus, the **melody** to my **favorite** Advent hymn was originally a **funeral** procession-al chant as the deceased person was being **carried** from the funeral Mass to the cemetery! Say it ain’t so! I hope this hasn’t forever ruined your experience of this “oldie but goodie” staple of Advent hymnody. For her life work in service of sacred music in the Church, Sr. More was awarded the Papal Cross *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* by Pope St. John Paul II.

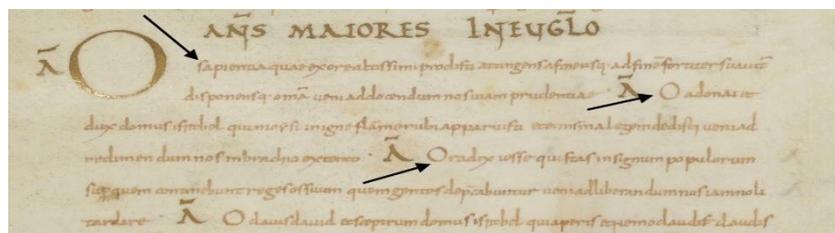


But as Sgt. Friday often quipped on *Dragnet*– “Just the facts, ma’am.” It is what it is. A beautiful set of evening prayer antiphons became **joined** to the melody from a funeral procession to produce a truly captivating hymn that daily draws us closer to Christmas. As each day progresses, the faithful grow in **anticipation** of the birth of our Savior. The liturgy unfolds the mystery, giving voice to the **longing and expectation** of the people for the birth of the Messiah. Bask in the final **full** week of Advent. Next year will be a completely different story–Christmas 2023 falls on a **Monday!**

- I received an **unexpected** call that came through (mistakenly) on the emergency line. It was from a neighbor inquiring when the **outdoor creche** was being put up. “This Saturday,” I responded. She went on to say that although not Catholic herself, she **loves to gaze** upon the annual display from her apartment window. Our strong turnout to assemble the creche resulted in some very happy neighbors!
- Last season, during halftime of an NBA game, **Enes Kanter Freedom** learned that Boston Celtics games were to be **banned** from broadcast in **China** for the rest of the 2021-22 season. Why? Because the 6’10” player wore a **pair of shoes** expressing his solidarity with Uyghur victims of human rights abuses in China. He has been a lone voice calling out the NBA for its complicity with China. Bravo!
- I encourage you to **invite** a family member or friend to **join you** for Christmas Mass this year. Do not be afraid to reach out to those who may have slipped in their practice of the faith. Trust in God’s grace!
- Communal Mass intention envelopes are available in the pews. All **names** will be placed on the **altar** for Christmas Masses. You may also help by donating to our **Christmas Flower Fund**. Envelopes are on the tables by the piers; write down the name of loved ones in whose honor you are donating.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Liber Responsalis of St. Gregory | Bibliothèque Nationale de France, (9th century)