

My friends in Christ, today's celebration of *Gaudete* Sunday is our annual Advent tradition of rejoicing in the midst of our Advent prayer and preparation for the birth of Christ at Christmas, and we rejoice because, as Saint Paul reminds us today, "the Lord is near." Of course, the Lord *always* is near – in our midst, in our hearts...in the Eucharist, which very soon we will come forward so as to receive Him, humbly, worthily and well. Yes, the Lord *always* is near. But of course what Advent is about is the nearness of the Lord's birth and our annual celebration of the Christ Child. "The Lord *is* near," therefore; and so it is that we, too, with daughter Zion, shout for joy; and we, too, with the people Israel, sing joyfully. We are glad, and we exult with all our hearts...because the Lord is near.

In the midst of joy and exultation, we find that beginning tomorrow, we enter into the final seven days of Advent before Christmas Eve; and each year, during these final days, Mother Church offers her faithful a beautiful set of prayers with which we rejoice and sing joyfully. They are a very *ancient* set of prayers – probably from as far back as the 8th Century; and thus, they are among some of our *most* ancient of Christian prayers that the Church still uses in her liturgy. They are known as the "O" Antiphons because each of these seven prayers speaks to God in the Person of Jesus with one of several biblical titles by which the Lord is made known to us, and each of these titles begins with the invocation "O."

Now, we all know these "O" Antiphons, whether we realize it or not. For one, they are our Alleluia verses for Mass during these final seven days of Advent; and so, if you are a weekday Mass-goer, you will hear these "O" Antiphons sung at Mass. But even apart from the weekday Mass, we all know these prayers because we all know that most famous, most popular Advent hymn, *O Come O Come Emmanuel*. And these seven prayers are the basis for the traditional verses of that hymn.

And so, I offer very brief reflections on the "O" Antiphons and offer them for you for your own prayer and preparation during these final seven days of Advent.

*O Wisdom of our God Most High,
guiding creation with power and love:
come and teach us the path of knowledge!*

O Sapientia! O Wisdom! We appeal to God first of all in these "O" Antiphons precisely by this most glorious title "Wisdom," for it was Wisdom what made all that is. "The Lord, by wisdom,

founded the earth.” And it is Wisdom-*Incarnate* Who *remakes* – makes *anew* – all that is: Jesus, Who makes all things new and ushers in the *new* Creation (the new Heaven and the new Earth). But such is not to say that all is made new *only* when Jesus comes again. Jesus makes all things new, has been hard at work from the very moment of His conception: Saint John the Baptist, before he was even born, leaped for joy in his mother’s womb when Mary’s greeting reached her ears. And Jesus, hard at work, continued to make all things new after His birth, in His infancy, in His childhood, *well* into adulthood, in His teaching, in His miracles, in His love for us, in His sacrifice for us. Indeed, He is Wisdom not only in *teaching* us what to do, how to live, how to be holy and perfect just as the Lord above is holy and perfect. He *teaches* us, He *tells* us, He *speaks* His Wisdom...*and* He *shows* it – *shows* His Wisdom – in the manger...on the Cross...in the tomb...and on His heavenly throne.... Thus, we sing to Him to teach us the path of knowledge – the way of His Wisdom – that we may follow where He has gone before....

*O Leader of the House of Israel,
Giver of the Law to Moses on Sinai:
come to rescue us with Your mighty power!*

O Adonai! O Lord! O Leader of nations! Jesus *is* our Leader. He leads by service to all in need; He leads by example; He does indeed *lead*. He gives us good example and speaks His blessed words of wisdom – *not*, however, as mere encouragement to follow Him...but as a *command*. When He calls Simon and Andrew, He does not say, “Gee, I hope that you might join Me.” No – in fact, He *tells* them, *commands* them: “Follow Me.” And then, He *leads* them. Because, after all, there are only two roads at the end of all things. One road follows Christ the Leader, and that road leads us to Heaven...whereas the other road does *not* follow Him, and *that* road does *not* lead us to Heaven but leads us instead...to *not-Heaven*.... Thus, we sing to Him to rescue us with His mighty power, to lead us, to bring us to Heaven....

*O Root of Jesse’s stem,
sign of God’s love for all His people:
come to save us without delay!*

O Radix Jesse! O Root! Now, “root” is a strange biblical title for Jesus; but then again, this biblical title may be just right after all. Consider for example the taproot of a very tall tree. A tree’s

root system, overall, may spread outward in a wide array; but the taproot grows straight down, right down into the ground – thereby giving the tree a remarkable strength and stability. It taps into that deeper ground so as to find a reliable water source so that the tree does not have to rely exclusively on the inconsistency of rain. Sometimes, the taproot is actually longer in the ground *below* than the tree itself reaching up into the sky *above*. But *lesser* plants can also have taproots: for example, that wondrous, tasty vegetable: the carrot. The carrot is a root; it is the taproot of the carrot plant. In Jesus, too, we find a remarkable strength and stability; and in Jesus, too, we find a source for us of great nourishment and health. And the Root of *Jesse* (Jesse being the father of King David) marks Jesus as the taproot – the strength and stability, the ongoing nourishment – of the kingship of the Chosen People; God chose Israel to be the Chosen People, and God chose David to rule, thus to serve as king of the Chosen People, and Jesus is the Son of David, the King of kings.... Thus, we sing to Him to save us without delay, to be our strength, our stability, our nourishment whenever and wherever we are weak, wavering, and famished for His love....

*O Key of David,
opening the gates of God's eternal Kingdom:
come and free the prisoners of darkness!*

O Clavis David! O Key of David! The Key unlocks and opens to any and all to whom it is granted to enter...but the Key closes and locks against all who have been cast out. May it be for us that we are found amongst the former and *not* the latter.... This particular biblical title for Christ of course conjures up an image of keys dangling from keychains. But we might also consider “key” as referring to the *keystone*. Jesus is called the “cornerstone,” and He is also called the “capstone” (the *keystone*, in other words). Now, what is a keystone? If you consider the doorways of old buildings such as castles or cathedrals, and you notice that the doorways are arched, then look at the very top of that arch and you will see the keystone. The keystone is shaped something like a “V,” and all of the other stones in that arch are fitted together such that they lean into that keystone. In theory, if the keystone is sound, then that arch will stand, and there would be no need for mortar. The force of gravity pushes those other stones inward against that keystone such that it is made to suffer and withstand a great deal of pressure – it is literally *crushed*. But again, if it is sound...if it is, as it were,

spotless and without blemish...then it will bear the suffering; it will remain strong; and it will keep the whole structure standing.... And so we find that *Jesus* is the Keystone; on the Cross, of course, He was made to suffer – *He* was crushed...crushed with infirmity...crushed for *our* iniquity. And yet, He is the Lamb of God, spotless and without blemish; He is the Keystone, strong and sound; and He keeps us all standing.... Thus, we sing to Him to keep us strong, to free us who, without Him, would only be prisoners trapped forever in the darkness....

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

O Oriens! O Dayspring! O Radiant Dawn! In the old Church, Christian worship in liturgy for Mass had the priest and the congregation all facing in the same direction: *ad orientum* – “toward the east.” And even the physical church buildings were constructed such that the building *itself* was made to face toward the east – toward the rising sun, the radiant dawn. Because the dawn rising in the east and casting down the darkness of night symbolizes Christ rising from the tomb to conquer the darkness of sin and Satan – death’s domain. And we are given this wonderful symbol of Christ and His glorious victory each *day* with the dawn...and each *year* with the celebration of His birth on Christmas when the shortest days of the year begin to grow longer – light returning...darkness and cold receding.... Thus, we sing to Him to shine on us who, *without* Him, would be doomed forever to dwell in darkness and in the shadow of death....

*O King of all nations and keystone of the Church:
come and save [us], whom you formed from the dust!*

O Rex Gentium! O King of the nations! We already considered Christ as King; we already considered the Keystone. But consider *now* this reference to our lowly origins; on Ash Wednesday, we will be reminded that we are but dust, and unto dust we shall return. How demeaning (perhaps we want to say)! How insulting! And yet, how *true*. And therefore, how humbling; and truly, how humiliating.... But this should not lead us into despair, though dust is despairing. Because we ask the King of all nations to seek and to save a pile of dust! And the King *will do* it! Kings have way more important things to do than save a useless pile of dust – and yet, *this* King, the *King* of kings,

not only *would* save us but in fact *has* saved us, *does* save us, and indeed went totally out of His way just to do so. For we are the one sheep lost in the wilderness, and He searches far and wide, over hill and dale, and seeks us, and finds us, and lifts us up, and places us on His shoulders. And thus He carries us home again.... Thus, we sing to Him to come and save us – though we are but dust, and He is the King of the nations....

And finally:

*O Emmanuel, our King and Giver of law:
come to save us, Lord our God!*

O Emmanuel! God is with us! And once again, we cry out to God not merely to be with us in some abstract sense of accompaniment, but to save us. And of course, to save us is precisely why He was born in the first place. Indeed, His very Name informs us *immediately* of His mission (“God saves”); simply to speak the Holy Name of Jesus, with awe and reverence, is to pray to God for our utmost need: to be saved. More than to get work...more than to be cured of some disease...more than to feed the hungry...most than to house the homeless...and even more than to pray for peace in our world.... Our most important, utmost need (and this is common to *all* of us – no matter our race, language, class, or creed).... Our most dire need...is to be *saved*. Saved from sin, from Satan, from death’s domain...saved *for* Heaven, *for* God, *for* life eternal in halls of heavenly realms....

May it be that these “O” Antiphons – and the Lord Himself of Whom they sing – will help us in these final days of Advent to encounter and embrace the grace and love and mercy of God in such a way as to be strengthened and nourished by God all the days of our lives.