Wisdom
Advent Devotions on the Names of Jesus

Forward Movement
Cincinnati, Ohio
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The O Antiphons are a series of seven short sentences ("antiphons") that are recited or chanted during Evening Prayer in the days leading up to Christmas. They are familiar to most of us as paraphrased in the Advent hymn, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” but they have been in use in the church (and especially in monastic communities) since at least the eighth century. The recitation of the O Antiphons comes before and after the Magnificat, the beloved Song of Mary. Each of the antiphons begins with “O” and references one of the titles for Jesus drawn from the Book of Isaiah. Each also includes a petition that springs from this title.

December 17: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)—Isaiah 11:2-3, 28:29
December 18: O Adonai (O Lord)—Isaiah 11:4-5, 33:22
December 19: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)—Isaiah 11:1, 10
December 20: O Clavis David (O Key of David)—Isaiah 9:6, 22:22
December 21: O Oriens (O Dayspring)—Isaiah 9:1
December 22: O Rex Gentium (O King of the Nations)—Isaiah 2:4, 9:5
December 23: O Emmanuel (O God with Us)—Isaiah 7:14
Advent is a season of waiting, of longing with eager expectation for God’s promise to be fulfilled. The O Antiphons direct our attention to the promised Messiah and build our expectation for his coming. The repeated use of the phrase “O Come” underscores our desire and enflames it. We await the Savior, as we anticipate his three-fold coming:

- as a child at Bethlehem on Christmas morning;
- daily, in our own experience;
- and his coming again in glory, as he has promised.

There is an interesting fact associated with the O Antiphons. The first letters of each of the titles, when followed from last to first—Emmanuel, Rex, Oriens, Clavis, Radix, Adonai, Sapientia—spell the Latin words *ero cras*. This phrase means, “Tomorrow, I will come.” Christ has promised to come to us and to be for us all that we need. In Advent, we wait for him, look for him, expect him. Pray your expectation and your faith in him. He has promised to come to us, where we are, as we are.

How do you desire Jesus to come to you now, in this particular season of your life? Which name or title reflects your current desire or need? You might pray with each of these seven names but consider also other names of Jesus, such as the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Way, or the Truth and the Life. Pray your desire and expect Jesus to come to you and meet you in the place of your greatest need.

Praying with the O Antiphons is an occasion for gratitude. God has not only *promised* to come to us but *has* come to us, and for this we offer grateful thanks. How have you experienced Jesus as *Emmanuel*,
“God with us”? Have you known him as an intimate friend and companion on the way? Or has Jesus been for you *Clavis*, a “key,” or *Oriens*, the “rising dawn” or “morning star,” enlightening you and shedding light on your path? When has Jesus been for you *Sapientia*, “wisdom” from on high, teaching you the way to true, authentic, abundant life?

*Pray your gratitude*, offering a prayer of thanksgiving for all that Jesus has been and all that he has done for you.

Brother David Vryhof, SSJE
Assistant Superior
The Society of Saint John the Evangelist
Linguistic ethno-biologists surmise that the first written prayers, prayers that are thousands of years old, match some vocal patterns of birds singing and chirping in contentment. I started crying when I heard that. There is something so beautiful about the thought of the birds of the air teaching us the song of God, something profound about the idea of us singing it back to God in the best way we know how. Some of that deep music, the soul-deep song we sing, is found in the words of Isaiah. Nowhere else in the entire Bible do we hear and repeat so many beautiful, poetic, and visceral names for God. It’s no wonder that the hymn the Church has assembled from these names, the O Antiphons, carries so much emotion and meaning for so many. That’s why we solicited contributions for this Advent devotional from people across the church. Through essays and poetry, art and photography, people joined the chorus.

Songs of thanks and praise, of lament and longing, of restoration and return have been on our lips for millennia. Calling out to the Living God, reminding ourselves of the promises made to us, and willing ourselves to stand firm in the midst of wars, disease,
destruction, conflict, and all the other terrible things we do to each other is a way of reminding ourselves of how things ought to be, of how we are to surrender to God, of the sovereignty of God’s mercy and righteous justice. Isaiah gives us a mighty chorus to sing in full-throated abandon, with verses that range from torch song to the lament of an unfaithful partner, from lullaby to love song, teaching us beloved names of the Beloved.

Traditionally, we begin singing the O Antiphons on December 17, with many places offering daily services between the 17th and Christmas Day. Through this book, we invite you to enjoy these beautiful prayers and praises during all of Advent and throughout Christmastide—and not just this year, but any year. We structured the book so that you can follow along with the weeks of Advent, regardless of how long or short a particular year’s season may be. You can read this book every single year—and learn new things every single time. Because there are seven O Antiphons, we invite you to begin your reflection on O Wisdom, the first Antiphon, in the week leading up to Advent.

The O Antiphons represent a way for us to sing along with this portion of the story of God, to lift up our hearts and voices along with Isaiah’s and the entire company of heaven. As we focus on the personality attributes that Isaiah reveals are part and parcel of the Messiah, we sit with all our ancestors and await Jesus’ coming in glory while we ponder his presence among us. It will take all of us singing together to hear the full range of notes and harmonies—and there will be key changes we don’t see coming. Sometimes we may not sing well together, or we may have to step away and catch our breath, or sing through a fit of the giggles or hiccup through sobs. But sing we must.
What is true for Isaiah and the children of Israel is true for us, too. God sees us, knows us, calls us, and invites us into the kingdom by name. With the O Antiphons, we are offered the opportunity to do the same—to see God in Christ, to know and be known by him, to call and invite him into our hearts and the world.

Our prayer for you is that you will find yourself singing and praying along with this book—and with all of creation—as you welcome Jesus, who was here from the foundation of the world, dwells among us in the mystery of the Holy Eucharist and in our hearts, and who is coming in glory to make all things new.

Rachel Jones
Editor
'O Rising Sun' was created using alcohol inks on white ceramic tile. Carefully directed forced air moved the inks across the tile, resulting in a multitude of rays, outstretched and reaching. Digital editing emphasized the presence of light in the darkness.

Donna Z. Falcone
O Come, O Come, Emmanuel

O come, Thou Wisdom from on high,
And order all things, far and nigh;
To us the path of knowledge show.
And cause us in her ways to go.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Adonai, Lord of might,
Who to Thy tribes, on Sinai’s height,
In ancient times didst give the law
In cloud and majesty and awe.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan’s tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o’er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heav’nly home;
Make safe the way that leads on high.
And close the path to misery.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.
O come, Thou Dayspring, from on high,
And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh;
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,
And death’s dark shadows put to flight.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, Desire of nations, bind
All peoples in one heart and mind;
Bid envy, strife and quarrels cease;
Fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

O come, O come, Emmanuel!
Redeem thy captive Israel
That into exile drear is gone,
Far from the face of God’s dear Son.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.
O WISDOM, who came from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end, and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: Come, and teach us the way of prudence.
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or by what his ears hear.        Isaiah 11:2-3

Wisdom is one of the most ancient names of Jesus. From the very first days of the church, Christians have equated the eternal Word (John 1:1) with the Wisdom of Christ (1 Corinthians 1:17-2:13). In Wisdom, all glory, power, knowledge, and radiance of God is found.

From the moment of creation, the Logos or the Word of God was present, bringing all things into being. Wisdom speaks creation into being. Without Christ, not one thing was made. So to invoke Wisdom is to recall Christ’s majesty from the beginning right up to our day and then to the end of all days.

We pray for prudence, the judgment to use all that God has given us for God’s glory. Being prudent does not mean being cautious. Rather, if we are prudent with what God has given us, we will use it well, for the good of all.

This antiphon is a plea for Christ’s coming so that we might glorify him in all that we do.

Scott Gunn
We all stand in need of wisdom these days. When truth itself is in question, contemporary society struggles mightily to recognize wisdom. Yet, with each passing day, our deep needs for wisdom and discernment in all areas of life are evident. But how do we become wise? We must begin with a desire to grow in wisdom. Our search for wisdom continues with the practice of discernment to develop character. Wisdom is sustained through daily prayer—it is a process of becoming. God is both the giver of wisdom and wisdom itself.

To desire wisdom is to seek to love God in radical ways. Wisdom allows us to see, think, speak, and do the will of God in all things. In desiring wisdom, we seek to align ourselves with actions that reveal the reign of God.

In the Jesuit spirituality that helped form me, desiring something is the first step toward discernment. Jesuits are taught the importance of desiring what is good, true, and beautiful—and leads to God’s greater glory. In conversation with a friend, she mentioned she had never thought of praying for wisdom. We gave each other the challenge to begin praying for wisdom daily, to desire wisdom in discernment.

This antiphon reminds us of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Wisdom contains a mosaic of gifts: knowledge, understanding, counsel, fortitude, piety, fear of the Lord. Indeed, wisdom opens many gateways to God. Let us pray more intentionally for wisdom. Let us
desire wisdom in this holy season and bear witness to the love and blessings God offers to us. Let us practice the right actions that help us grow in wisdom.

From a place of wisdom, may we remember that we are made in the image and likeness of God and called to be God’s presence in the world.

From a place of wisdom, may we remember that we are called to serve the lost, the least, and the poor. We are called to see God in them and be God for them.

From a place of wisdom, may we remember and believe that whatever we do to the least, we do to God. Wisdom invites us to see that the stranger, the prisoner, the immigrant, the refugee, the homeless, and the poor are God in hiding, God made manifest.

May we remember. Amen.

Mark Bozzuti-Jones
In the Roman Catholic tradition, “Seat of Wisdom” or “Throne of Wisdom” (the English translation of the Latin sedes sapientiae) is one of several devotional titles for Mary, the Mother of God. It describes her status as the vessel in which the Holy Child was carried. In Seat of Wisdom icons and sculptures, Mary is seated on a throne holding the Christ child in her lap. She is also the seat on which Christ, the embodiment of divine wisdom, sits.

In the early 1990s, St. Thomas Church Fifth Avenue, New York City, where I am a parishioner, received its own Seat of Wisdom sculpture, known as Our Lady of Fifth Avenue. Sculpted and cast in bronze by the late Mother Concordia, who was an English nun and artist, the work captures the serene bearing of the Madonna and the loving wisdom of the Christ Child.

Dear Lord, as we make our way through a world that is often noisy and disquieting, please help us to be as serene and steady as Mary. Help us also to seek and embrace the wisdom of her son Jesus Christ. Amen.

Pamela Lewis
I was a high school teacher for nearly three decades. I learned that wisdom and understanding are as important to being an effective instructor as being an expert in the subject area.

On a hard day, with voice raised and eyes welling, a student accused me of treating her unfairly. Taking her hands in mine, I responded calmly and suggested we meet to talk during a time convenient to both of us. In retrospect, I believe I acted wisely by deeply listening and was able to compassionately counsel my student with an understanding ear. Our relationship improved.

The Pharisees, scribes, and other powerful and clever people seek to ensnare Jesus with their smart questions. But Jesus is always wise. He puts his wisdom into action, both by disputing the experts in the temple and challenging would-be stone-throwers and through his conduct when he faces arrest, trial, condemnation, and death.

From Mary’s womb to the Garden Tomb, the Spirit of the Lord rests on Jesus. It is with profound and holy wisdom, understanding, and counsel that Jesus teaches his disciples—and continues to teach us.

Dear Lord, Help me remember that your wisdom is greater than the knowledge of the world. Help me to be discerning, as well as wise, and to be guided by the mind of Jesus, not just the minds of humans.

Amen.

Pamela Lewis
We live in a postmodern world. We celebrate relativism and globalism, distrust history and language, and denounce capitalism and absolutism. Society professes devotion to the values of inclusion and diversity reflected in Jesus’ commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39b). Yet we live in a dystopian, dysphoric, and disoriented society. Our nightly news and social media lead with stories of fear and hate and random violence.

Thankfully, the ancients see prudence as the foundation of all virtues because it provides discernment for us to conduct our lives with courage, temperance, and justice. Just as God uses unrivaled power and transcendent love to transform elemental chaos into an ordered universe, so can our own wise choices transform the cacophony of our daily lives into perfect harmony—in our hearts and in our lives with others.

As we begin Advent, this holy season of solemn contemplation and preparation, may we realize that we can only find the peace we seek when we choose with Wisdom to lead lives in God’s perfect order.

O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit, we may be truly wise and ever enjoy his consolations, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Vicki Bozzola Derka
“O Sapientia:” This original pen and ink drawing features a goose, a Celtic symbol of the Holy Spirit—the giver of wisdom and peace—with a clutch of goslings.

Stephanie London
O WISDOM, your words spoken in the beginning of creation generated a world of beauty and goodness: Come and instruct us in the way of prudence, that we may care for your world with justice and compassion; through the one whom we know as the Wisdom of the Ages, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.