

How titles teach

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► O my! For several years, I've known Larry Livingston to be a terrific writer. And I knew he was just the person who could help us all better understand the beautiful, but somewhat obscure tradition of the O Antiphons. (Most of us know them as the song, "O Come, O Come Emmanuel.") This is great stuff for catechists, teachers, and parents. < NW

There is power in names. Scripturally speaking, to know one's name is to know a person's essence. Perhaps that is why in Scripture we never really know the name of God. We know God by many substitute names, but never in the Bible do we really hear of a definitive, all-encompassing name for God. When Moses asked who spoke to him from the burning bush the response was the sublimely accurate—yet still cryptic—"I am who am." No mortal is ever able to fully grasp the essence of the Almighty.

We understand God not so much by name but by titles. Christian tradition has many of these and,

while each falls short of fully describing God, collectively they give us in insight into the multifaceted glory of our Creator. Nowhere is this more richly expressed than in the traditional seven titles for the Messiah known as the O Antiphons.

Beginning December 17 the O Antiphons are recited, one each evening, before and after the Magnificat. As each night's prayer reveals another title for the coming Messiah, we grow in our appreciation of the God who will soon walk among us. Climaxing with the final acclamation of the Messiah as "Emmanuel" (God with us) on Christmas Eve, the O Antiphons lead us directly into the celebration of the Incarnation.

Following are the seven traditional O Antiphons, with reflections on what each teaches us about Jesus, the Messiah. Catechists can use these reflections as discussion starters to encourage learners to think creatively about the various ways Jesus gifts their own lives.

O Wisdom, *who came from the mouth the Most High, reaching from end to end and ordering all things mightily and sweetly: Come and teach us the way of prudence.*

Wisdom, one of the traditional gifts of the Holy Spirit, has always been a valuable quality. Today, in an era when humankind seems to place a higher premium on the cleverness of the moment, true wisdom is priceless. The first O Antiphon proclaims Jesus not only as wise but as wisdom itself, which is a testament to his divinity. He is the eternal Son, one in being with the Father, from whom all creation flowed. Now he will take on human flesh and become for us the very model of life wisely lived.

WISDOM

LORD

ROOT OF JESSE

KEY OF DAVID

DAWN OF THE EAST

KING OF THE GENTILES

EMMANUEL

O Lord and ruler 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 with outstretched arms.

Moses was the great lawgiver. Yet, as this antiphon attests, even Moses is subordinate to the Messiah of God. In this antiphon, which foreshadows the Transfiguration, the authority of Jesus is revealed. But unlike the religious leaders of his day, Jesus' authority will flow not from a position of privilege but from sacrificial love. In this outpouring of love, the law of Moses will be brought to fulfillment.

O Root of Jesse, who stands for an ensign of the people, before whom kings shall keep silence and unto whom the Gentiles shall make supplication. Come to deliver us, and tarry not.

Jesse was the father of David, the great king. At a time when the nation suffered the brutal indignity of Roman occupation, the people longed for another leader from the "root of Jesse." Jesus will fulfill the nation's hopes for a deliver, but in ways beyond their imagining. Because he is also Son of God, his roots run even deeper than those of Jesse.

O Key of David, and Scepter of the House of Israel, who opens and no man shuts, who shuts and no one opens: Come and bring forth the captive from his prison, he who sits in darkness and the shadow of death.

Sadly, even in our best moments, we see that human justice is flawed. Jesus, the Messiah, will renew the hopes of humanity and show that God's justice will prevail. He will liberate the oppressed and call the mighty to account in the integrity of his life, and he will teach us that love of God is inseparable from love of neighbor.

O Dawn of the East, brightness of the light eternal, and Sun of Justice: Come, and enlighten them that sit in

O Antiphons at Home

Teaching children about the Incarnation is difficult, especially with all the secular and sentimental distractions during the Advent/Christmas season. The O Antiphons can provide a way for parents to help children think creatively about the coming of Jesus into their lives and into the world. Here are three activities families can do together:

Beginning December 17th, pray the traditional evening prayers for the Octave of Christmas together as a family. Plan some sharing time before the closing prayer for each member to share what the O Antiphon for that evening represents to them. You may need to modify the prayers for smaller children, but don't underestimate them! Often the young ones come up with the most creative images.

If your family has a Jesse tree, prepare symbols that are specifically drawn from the themes of the O Antiphons. For example, since the burning bush is referenced in the antiphon for December 18th ("O Lord and Ruler..."), design a burning bush emblem to place on the tree. If the family does not have a Jesse tree, use the Christmas tree instead.

Have a family discussion about the meaning of each member's name. Parents can share why they chose the names of individual children. Draw pictures symbolizing the meanings of the names. Some names may be without deep historical or Christian roots, but that is okay. You can always use a middle name or borrow the name of an admired saint.

darkness and in the shadow of death.

We look east to the rising sun, a symbol of hope and light. The Sun/Son of Justice, the Messiah of God, will dispel the darkness of despair and scatter the shadows of hatred. The warmth of his light will melt the fears that divide peoples and renew our capacity to love. Jesus will defeat the great bully, death, by living freely and joyfully. When his life of integrity brings him to his cross, he will embrace it with courage and teach us by noble example that resurrection awaits those who embrace the light.

O King of the Gentiles and their desired One, the Cornerstone that makes both one: Come and deliver humanity, which you formed out of the dust of the earth.

Through war and betrayal, the unity of families and nations has disintegrated. The Messiah will restore creation and teach us of the nobility of all humanity, Gentile and Jew alike. It is he who elevates the "dust of the earth" from which we all come and infuses it with divine dignity.

O Emmanuel, God with us, our King and Lawgiver, the expected of the nations and their Savior. Come to save us, O Lord our God.

Finally we are gifted with the great manifestation of God's love expressed in the Incarnation. God has become one of us, taking on all that is human: our joys, our pains, our temptations. Whatever it is to be human Jesus will embrace, yet he will live a life free of sin. Therein lies truly joyful news, for just as Jesus' life was not enslaved to sin, neither do ours need to be. In the Messiah we come to know the true dignity of the human person, created by God for union with God. **RTJ**



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