

Singing in Anticipation

Paul Turner

Advent is gasping for air. Many Catholics love the Advent season with its prophecies and hopefulness, its candles and vesture, its spiritual preparation and reflection – and, yet, few people deeply observe the season. They wish they could do more, but they slip into the stifling vortex of Christmas shopping, planning and partying. Advent can hardly breathe.

The parish staff struggles to gather members for religious formation at any time of year, but Advent poses unique challenges. People have too many other priorities. They may come for mass. They may shop for the needy. However, they rarely take time for themselves. Advent is a short season – claiming four weeks, but the calendar almost always clips several days from it – and some years Advent barely survives beyond its fourth Sunday.

However, this year is different. With Christmas on a Sunday, we are receiving the longest Advent possible. If people ever want to make Advent special, this could be their chance. In recent years, people in my parish have been invited to reflect together more deeply on this season by using the booklet, *What Am I Doing for Advent This Year?* Although the booklet is designed for personal use – a do-it-yourself retreat for the season – many people benefit from gathering a small group to reflect together. The extra motivation that a community offers provides needed support some people need to reflect on their spiritual life.

We used the booklet on the first three Sundays of the season one year. Parishioners who wanted to do something during Advent were asked to bring a Bible to a session after mass. They were invited to explore a number of biblical passages pertaining to three key Advent figures: Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Mary. By asking people to locate the citations, they gained more familiarity with their Bible, as well being offered the opportunity to see some familiar passages in a broader context. They saw how Isaiah spreads his expansive message, how John reappears at significant moments in the early ministry of Jesus, and how Mary prepared herself and the world for the coming of her Son.

The sessions were conducted in the style of *lectio divina*. Different members of the group read a key passage several times. After each reading, people were invited to share something of what they heard and thought. Everyone's response is personal, so the facilitator must avoid imposing a "correct interpretation" of the passages at hand. It was fascinating to watch the word of God go to work with people gathered as one. There was a prayerful atmosphere with the biblical texts taking center stage.

Another year, the booklet was used to present the O Antiphons. Instead of meeting on three Sundays, the group was led through a single evening of Advent preparation. The O Antiphons were designed to accompany the Magnificat during evening prayer from December 17-23, and now they also serve now as the vehicle for the gospel acclamation at mass during the same weekdays before Christmas. Each opens with a word that signals the vocative ("O"), and concludes with a petition for Christ to come ("*veni*").

Many people live unaware of the rich treasure of these antiphons. They do not take the time to study them, or to pray them – but they can be invited to gain familiarity with them and to use them for personal prayer. To start on this occasion, they were given an overview of the Liturgy of the

Hours, its Evening Prayer, and the function of the daily Magnificat – as well as its biblical origin. This was followed by an explanation of what antiphons are, how they frame the Magnificat, and how they underscore some aspect of the celebration at hand.

Each of the O Antiphons was reviewed in turn – showing how each weaves numerous biblical images. Participants were then asked to look up passages in their Bibles, to talk about what they originally meant, how they were adapted into antiphons, and what they say to us today. For example, the antiphon for December 19, Root of Jesse, starts from Isaiah 11:1. After hearing this prophecy, we see the birth of Jesus as a new sprout from an old tree. Isaiah still extends hope to those who may fear, as the years go by, that they have less to offer.

The same antiphon sends us deeper into the Bible to look up the relationship between this shoot and the unbelieving nations of the world (Isaiah 11:10 and Romans 15:12.) We read of kings who stood silent before the suffering servant (Isaiah 52:15). We see how people prayed that God's vision would not be delayed (Habakkuk 2:3 and Hebrews 10:37.)

Having presented the biblical foundations and discussed modern meanings, people were led in silent prayer over the message. One additional step was taken with each antiphon – the chant can be sung in Latin so that people could hear the way it was composed. Of course, it was intended for a group of singers chanting vespers, not for a solo voice. Still, most people know these antiphons only through the popular hymn “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” and few have sung or heard the original chant. A leader without the skills to sing could play a recording of professional singers. That might create the effect more thoroughly than a solo voice can convey.

To conclude the evening, the participants were told about one more antiphon – the one assigned to the Magnificat for Evening Prayer II on the Solemnity of the Ascension. It imitates the structure of the O Antiphons. As with those for Advent, this one begins with the same word and calls upon Christ with a special title, “O King of glory.” However, instead of asking the Second Person to come, the antiphon asks for the Third Person: “Send to us the promised one of the Father, the Spirit of truth.” It ushers in another season of waiting for a feast – not four weeks before Christmas, but nine days before Pentecost. It sends an arc around the liturgical year.

For one night in a parish, that Advent exercise seemed to work. However, the antiphons were meant to be strung out day by day, inviting people to join a quiet insistence for Christ to come. Hence, participants were urged to make these antiphons a part of their prayer in the week before Christmas. It's probably the worst time of year to find extra minutes for prayer, but it is perhaps the best of year to do it. Prayer can supply fresh air to the lungs of Advent, a season that can truly inspire.

To do:

- Provide your parish with a personal prayer aid for Advent.
- Invite members to share pertinent biblical passages.
- Sing, study and pray the O Antiphons.

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