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THE O ANTIPHONS, SCRIPTURAL PORTRAIT

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HE WEALTH OF THE CHURCH'S LITURGY is inexhaustible. Like a spring bubbling out from hidden depths to fill the cup we dip, and offering us fresh water when we would dip again, the liturgy offers something new to our inquiry each time we repeat the liturgical cycle. During each season we find something special to absorb our attention. It is as though the Church, to make certain that we fail not to consider all aspects of our Christian Faith, passes them repeatedly before our mental vision. At the same time she reminds us that each aspect thus presented is not to be divorced from the rest; for how can we have the consummation on Calvary without the beginning at Bethlehem?

During the Christmas season the Church contemplates the coming of the Saviour, pondering over the Christmas story as it is told in the Sacred Scriptures. There, in the very words of the Holy Spirit, she sees depicted the Plan of Redemption and the Messiah who is to carry it out. So as to lose nothing of the divine beauty of these truths, she retains the words of the Divine Author and incorporates them into the liturgy.

Among the rich results of this incorporation are the *O Antiphons* of the Advent Office. They are so called because each antiphon begins with this interjection of wonderment. There are seven in all, one being chanted on each of the *Greater Ferias*, as the seven days immediately preceding the vigil of Christmas are called. Although the exact origin of these antiphons is not known, their use in the Church as early as the eighth century is certain. Their number was increased at times in certain localities. Thus we find that for

some time during the Middle Ages two were added, one addressed to the Blessed Virgin and one to the Angel Gabriel. For the greater part, however, their number has remained fixed at seven.

They have always been chanted with special solemnity, although the ceremony accompanying the chant has not always been uniform. In some choirs they were chanted by the seven oldest members of the community, beginning with the oldest on the first day and ending with the seventh on the last day. Their position in the Office as the *Magnificat* Antiphons gave occasion for added solemnity because of their proximity to this beloved canticle of Our Lady. In some places each antiphon was sung three times by the entire choir: before the *Magnificat*, and before and after the concluding *Gloria Patri*.

The reason for this solemnity becomes evident when we examine the antiphons. It has been truly said that the sight of the marvelous leaves one speechless, yet demands an expression of admiration. As he gazes in wonder, a sigh rises from the inner depths of his being, and the one word that escapes him is, "—Oh h h!" The Church, seeing the infinite wisdom of the Divine Plan and the ineffable beauty of the Redeemer, puts this word on the lips of her ministers to impress us with the beauty of the object of her contemplation. During the greater part of Advent she has been gazing upon the God Incarnate, Whose coming she is to celebrate on Christmas Day. What she sees causes, as it were, a stir of admiration that rises inarticulate until it bursts forth on each of the last seven days in the solemnity of the *Greater Ferias*. Each day she addresses the Messiah with a new title. Each day she tells us, in the words of the Holy Ghost, something about this Messiah and the unfolding of the Plan of Redemption, and with increasing desire addresses her Saviour with a plea to come.

In their concise brevity these antiphons are, as it were, a silhouette of the full rich portrait of the Divine Plan of Redemption. To fill out the delicate lines of this silhouette, we have only to go to their source, the Sacred Scriptures. Guided by the fine lines of the O Antiphons we can see the gradual revelation of the divinely designed masterpiece, the Redemption, and see in it all the shades and colors with which the Divine Author of the Sacred Scriptures chose to depict it. When we have seen this whole Scriptural picture we will join in the "O" of admiration at its perfect fulfillment, the Emmanuel in the arms of Mary.

O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti, attingens a fine usque ad finem fortiter, suaviterque disponens omnia: veni ad docendum nos viam prudentiae.

O wisdom, which hast proceeded from the mouth of the Most High, reaching from end to end mightily and ordering all things sweetly, come and teach us the way of prudence.

The will of God is eternal. Before all time, God decrees the Redemption of man. Although the fulfilment of that decree has its beginning in time, the plan is in the Divine Mind from all eternity, disposing all things for the unwavering fulfilment of the redemptive mission. This mission is to be accomplished by Divine Wisdom Itself, the Eternal Word, Who is the Son of God, generated eternally in the bosom of the Father.

Thus Wisdom speaks to us in the Old Testament: "I come out of the mouth of the Most High, the firstborn before all ages" (Ecclus. 24/5), that "reacheth therefore from end to end mightily and ordereth all things sweetly" (Wis. 8/1).

The temporal realization of the redemptive plan had its radical beginning in the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve, by their sin, occasioned the need for a Redeemer. Death became the lot of man, and his body was destined to return to the earth from which it came. Man's final resurrection from the dead would be guaranteed only after grace had been won for him by the Messiah Who was to come.

Although God disclosed the eternal secret in Paradise immediately after the first sin, it does not seem to have been realized by men before the time of Abraham. To Abraham God gave the Promise when He said, "In thy seed shall all the nations be blessed" (Gen. 28/18). Later it was Isaias who reminded his people of the Promise. "Be comforted, be comforted, my people, saith your God. . . . Knowest thou not or hast thou not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, Who hath created the ends of the earth. He shall not faint nor labor, neither is there any searching out of His wisdom" (Isa. 40/1, 28).

The first antiphon thus gives us an inkling of what is to follow. It leaves us in the position of one who is told that something wonderful is going to happen, without having more than an intimation of what it will be. Until we have studied the other antiphons, we shall not appreciate the beauty of this one, any more than one can appreciate the music that haunted a Bach or a Beethoven until he has heard it played. When we have seen them,

we shall look back, as the Church does, and glorify the Eternal God. We shall ask Him to come and fulfill in our hearts the promise He makes to His children: "I will yet pour out doctrine as prophecy, and will leave it to them that seek wisdom, and will not cease to instruct their offspring even to the holy age" (Ecclus. 24/46).

O Adonai, et dux domus Israel, qui Moysi in igne flammae rubi apparuisti, et ei in Sina Legem dedisti: veni ad redimendum nos in brachio extento.

O Adonai, and Leader of the House of Israel, Who didst appear to Moses in the red fire of the burning bush, and didst give him the Law on Sinai, come and redeem us in Thy outstretched arm.

O Adonai! This name was not known by Abraham, or Isaac, or Jacob. It was first heard by Moses in Egypt, where God's chosen people were living in slavery. When the time came to lead them out of Egypt, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. "And the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he saw that the bush was on fire and was not burnt. . . . God said to Moses: "I AM WHO AM." He said: Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: He Who Is hath sent me to you" (Exod. 3/2, 14). Some time later God again appeared to Moses. "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: I am the Lord that appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, by the name of God Almighty: and my name *Adonai* I did not show them. I am the Lord your God Who will bring you out of the prisons of the Egyptians: and will deliver you from bondage, and redeem you with a high arm and great judgments. And I will take you to myself for my people" (Exod. 6/2, 3, 6, 7).

The exodus from Egypt began. Under the leadership of Moses and Aaron the Israelites undertook the trek through the wilderness. Their wandering brought them to Mount Sinai where, as the antiphon states, they received the Law from God. "And when Moses had brought them forth to meet God from the place of the camp, they stood at the bottom of the mount. And all Mount Sinai was on a smoke: because the Lord had come down upon it in a fire, and the smoke arose from it as out of a furnace. And all the mount was terrible. . . . And Moses said to the people: fear not, for God is come to prove you, and that the dread of Him might be upon you, and you should not sin" (Exod. 19/17, 18; 20/20). It was here that the world received the Mosaic Law.

"And the Lord said to Moses: write all these words by which I made a covenant both with thee and with Israel" (Exod. 34/27). The Ark of the Covenant was built. The Holy of Holies was established, and God took up His abode among His people. Henceforth, the *shekinah*, God's special Presence, hovered over the Ark of the Covenant until the day of Calvary. With the death of Christ the Mosaic Law was abrogated, and God withdrew His Presence from the Jewish Temple.

O Radix Jesse, qui stas in
signum populorum, super quem
continebunt reges os suum,
quem gentes deprecabuntur:
veni ad liberandum nos, jam
noli tardare.

O Root of Jesse, Who stand-
est as a sign of the people, be-
fore whom kings will not open
their mouths, to whom the na-
tions will pray, come to free
us; do not tarry any longer.

In this antiphon we have our first view of the Messiah. We know from St. Luke's Gospel how it came about that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It was because His mother, Mary, and her spouse, St. Joseph, were of the house of David. They must, therefore, go to Bethlehem, to the place where King David was born, to be enrolled according to the decree of Caesar Augustus. Thus the Gospel narrates what the Old Testament prefigured. The Messiah was to be of the seed of Abraham, of the house of David. David, a son of Jesse, was called from the pastures and his flocks near Bethlehem to become the second king that God gave to the Israelites. He was the first powerful king of a united Israel.

Let the Sacred Scriptures tell us of David's holy Progeny, the Anointed One from out of the root of Jesse. "And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse: and a flower shall rise out of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and fortitude, the spirit of knowledge and of Godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge according to the sight of his eyes, nor reprove according to the hearing of his ears. But he shall judge the poor with justice, and shall reprove with equity for the meek of the earth. And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth: and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. And justice shall be the girdle of his loins: and faith the girdle of his reins" (Isai. 11/2-5).

The second clause of the antiphon, "before whom kings will

not open their mouths," suggests the prefiguration in the Book of Job: "The young men saw me and hid themselves: and the old men rose up and stood. The princes ceased to speak, and laid the finger on their mouth; the rulers held their peace; and their tongue cleaved to their throat. The ear that heard me blessed me: and the eye that saw me gave witness to me, because I had delivered the poor man that cried out; and the fatherless, that had no helper. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me; and I comforted the heart of the widow. I was clad with justice: and I clothed myself with my judgment, as with a robe and a diadem. I was an eye to the blind, and a foot to the lame. I was the father of the poor" (Job 29/8-16a).

As the rest of the antiphon indicates, the Messiah appears before His people as the eternal way of salvation—and here the antiphon gives the figure of the Passion of Christ. The sign of salvation is the cross, and the redemptive act is the crucifixion, which was consummated on Calvary and is perpetuated in the Holy Mass. "In that day, the root of Jesse, who standeth for an ensign of the people, him the Gentiles shall beseech: and his sepulchre shall be glorious" (Isai. 11/10). "He shall grow up as a tender plant and as a root out of the thirsty ground. There is no beauty in him, nor comeliness: and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him. Despised and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with infirmity. . . . He was wounded for our iniquities: He was bruised for our sins. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him: and by his bruises we are healed. . . . The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isai. 53/2, 3, 5, 6). "From the rising of the sun even to the going down, my name is great among the Gentiles, and in every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to my name a clean oblation. For my name is great among the Gentiles, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Malach. 1/11).

O Clavis David, et sceptrum
domus Israel, qui aperis et
nemo claudit, claudis et nemo
aperit: veni, et educ vincitum
de domo carceris sedentem in
tenebris et umbra mortis.

O Key of David, and scepter
of the House of Israel, who
openest and none shutteth,
shuttest and none openeth,
come and lead out the van-
quished from the house of im-
prisonment, sitting in darkness
and in the shadow of death.

As the somber hues of a painting accentuate the brighter

coloration and bring out the beauty of the whole, so does the misery of man bring out the mercy of God. In this antiphon, the Church shifts her attention from the merciful God to the object of His mercy. Yet the sight of man's wretchedness does not leave her dejected, for she is consoled by this new title, by which she expresses hope in the power and mercy of the Redeemer. He is the key that will open the prison of sin, where man sits in the darkness of ignorance and in the shadow of eternal death. With singular effectiveness she reminds us of the figure preserved for us by Isaias the Prophet, and contrasts it with the pathetic condition of the Israelites in the Babylonian captivity.

Isaias lamented the devastation of Juda. In this lamentation he was comforted by God's repeated promise. This promise is clothed in the figure of the substitution of Eliacim for Sobna as a priest in the Temple of Jerusalem. "I will clothe him with thy robe, and will strengthen him with thy girdle, and will give the power into his hand: and he shall be as a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Juda. And I will lay the key of David upon his shoulder: and he shall open, and none shall shut; and he shall shut, and none shall open" (Isa. 22/21, 22). Our Lord confirmed this prefiguration when He spoke to Saint John the Evangelist in a vision on the Island of Patmos: "And to the Angel of the Church of Philadelphia write: these things saith the Holy One and the True One, He that hath the key of David, he that openeth and no man shutteth, shutteth and no man openeth" (Apoc. 3/7).

At this time God's chosen people were, in the words of the antiphon, "vanquished" and in "the house of imprisonment." They were the slaves of King Nabuchadonosor of Babylon in the valley of the Euphrates. It is of this dark hour that the Psalmist sings: "Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept: when we remember Sion. . . . For there they that led us into captivity required of us the words of songs. How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?" (Ps. 136/1, 3, 4).

Once more Isaias reassures us. "Incline your ear and come to me. Hear and your soul shall live. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, the faithful mercies of David. Behold I have given him for a witness to the people, for a leader and a master to the Gentiles" (Isa. 55/34). The day will come when God's people will again sing the Psalmist's words of thanksgiving: "For he hath satisfied the empty soul, and hath filled the hungry soul with good things; such as sat in darkness and in the shadow of

death, bound in want and in iron. . . . They were weakened, and there was none to help them. They cried out to the Lord in their affliction; and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He brought them out of the darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bonds in sunder" (Ps. 106/9, 12, 13, 14).

O Oriens, splendor lucis aeternae, et Sol justitiae, veni et illumina sedentes in tenebris, et umbra mortis.

O Oriens, splendor of eternal light, and Sun of Justice, come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

With the edict of Cyrus, the Babylonian captivity came to an end. The children of Israel were permitted to come out of the murkiness of bondage into the light of freedom. Here we have an historical figure interwoven with the incipient signs of the actual fulfilment of the saving promise.

The dawn of redemption was drawing near. The light of the Sun of Justice was beginning to dispel the gloom of banishment. Even during the exile, Daniel and Ezekiel had prophesied to the people the salvation to come, and the sustained hope in the promise prevented a complete blackness in the caverns of despair. But after the exile, we find the prophets Zacharias and Malachias uttering new prophecies, directing their people's gaze to the Sun of Justice, the Rising One. "Hear, O Jesus, thou high priest, thou and thy friends that dwell before thee, for they are portending men.¹ For behold, I will bring my servant the Orient"² (Zach. 3/8). "Behold a man, the Orient is his name" (Zach. 6/12). "For behold the day shall come kindled as a furnace: and the proud and all that do wickedly shall be stubble. . . . And unto you that fear my name the Sun of Justice shall arise" (Malach. 4/1, 2). These prophecies recall the following words of Isaias: "At the first time, the land of Zabulon and the land of Nephtali was lightly touched: and at the last the way of the sea beyond the Jordan of the Galilee of the Gentiles was heavily loaded. The people that walked in the darkness have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen. Thou hast multiplied the nation and hast not increased the joy. They shall rejoice before thee, as they that rejoice in the harvest, as con-

¹ These men, by their words and actions, are to foreshadow wonders that are to come. *Comm. Douay version*, p. 899.

² Christ according to His humanity is the servant of God. *ibid.*

querors rejoice after taking a prey, when they divide the spoils. For the yoke of their burden and the rod of their shoulder, and the sceptre of their oppressor, thou hast overcome" (Isa. 9/1-4). Christ fulfilled this prophecy when "leaving the city of Nazareth, he came and dwelt in Capharnaum, on the sea coast, in the borders of Zabulon and of Nephthalim, that it might be fulfilled which was said by Isaiah the prophet: Land of Zabulon and land of Nephthalim, the way of the sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles: the people that sat in darkness hath seen a great light: and to them that sat in the region of the shadow of death, a light is sprung up" (Matt. 4/13-16).

The second half of the antiphon is a prayer similar to the prayer ending the preceding antiphon. But we notice a significant change. The Church no longer says: "come and lead the vanquished out of the house of imprisonment," but: "come and enlighten." She says it, not in an agony of discouragement, but with a hope that is the harbinger of joy; and we look forward out of the palling darkness, as she says with the Psalmist: "Consider and hear me, O Lord my God, enlighten my eyes that I may never sleep in death" (Ps. 12/4). With a holy anticipation she calls to mind the words of the priest, Zachary, who, at the birth of his son, John the Baptist, prophesied: "And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways: to give knowledge of salvation to his people, unto the remission of sins. Through the bowels of the mercy of our God, in which the Orient from on high hath visited us: to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death: to direct our feet into the way of peace" (Luke 1/76-79).

O Rex gentium, et desideratus earum, lapisque angularis, qui facis utraque unum: veni et salva hominem, quem de limo formasti.

O King of nations, and desired of them, and the corner-stone, who dost make both one, come and save man whom thou hast formed of slime.

The remaining centuries of the Old Testament could now be counted on one hand. As they slowly moved into the past, the attention of the Jews turned more and more to the King who was to come. The conquest of Alexander came and went. The Jews looked for their new King who would come and free them, but His coming remained only a promise. Once more they were put under a foreign hand, when Pompey made them a part of

the Roman empire. With great longing the people wished for the King who would liberate them from the hated oppressor and establish once and for all the mighty kingdom of Israel.

One day a wise man had a vision. Exactly who he was or where he lived we do not know. We do know that, with companions who had shared his vision, he set out on a westward journey to find a Child and adore Him. The question these wanderers would ask was: "Where is He that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and are come to adore Him" (Matt. 2/2, 3).

"King of the Jews!" The Redeemer is about to come! Christ is King of the Jews, and much more. For God had promised to Abraham: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22/18). The antiphon, therefore, calls Christ the King of the Nations. He would establish a new kingdom in which men of all races and times would be His willing and loyal subjects. "There is none like to Thee, O Lord: Thou art great, and great is Thy name in might. Who shall not fear Thee, O King of Nations, for Thine is the glory" (Jer. 10/6, 7).

"For thus saith the Lord of Hosts: yet one little while and I will move the heaven and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will move all nations: and the desired of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory, saith the Lord of Hosts" (Aggeus 2/7, 8).

At this point the antiphon warns us lest we deceive ourselves. For we will be disappointed if we are looking for the splendor of an earthly palace. Two words, *lapisque angularis*, the cornerstone, give us the key to the true state of things. To the worldly minded the King of Nations will indeed be an enigma, for His kingdom is not of this world.

To those whose vision is shackled to the material, sensual aspect of things. He will be an imposter whose doctrine and miracles will not elicit in them the response of faith and love. But even while they are plotting to indict Him for blasphemy and remove Him from the world, He will dig deep down into the heart of humanity. There He will lay the foundation of His heavenly kingdom the Church, of which He Himself will be the cornerstone. He will build it upon Peter, the Rock, and will rule it through His visible vicar. Saints will proclaim His mercy, and sinners will decry His justice. Christ, the Redeemer and ruler of all men, will thus stand forever before the questioning minds of sinful men as the reconciler of divine mercy and justice.

"The stone which the builders rejected: the same is become the head of the corner" (Ps. 117/22). "Go and say to My servant David: . . . I will raise up thy seed after thee, . . . and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house to My name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Kings, 7/5, 12, 13). "I have sworn to David My servant: thy seed will I settle forever. And I will build up thy throne unto generation and generation. . . . I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure forever. And his throne as the sun before Me, and as the moon perfect forever" (Ps. 88/4, 5, 36, 37, 38). "Surely His salvation is near to them that fear Him: that glory may dwell in our land. Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed. Truth is sprung out of the earth: and justice hath looked down from heaven" (Ps. 84/10, 11, 12).

O Emmanuel, Rex et legifer
noster, exspectatio gentium et
Salvator earum: veni ad salvand-
um nos, Domine Deus noster.

O Emmanuel, our King and
lawgiver, the expectation of the
nations and their Saviour: come
and save us, O Lord our God.

God is with us!

Any attempt to comment here would be like casting a pebble upon the motionless crystal surface of a mountain lake reflecting the scenery mirrored in it. As one looks up from the lake to see the reality it reflects, so must we turn from the words of the antiphon to the words spoken by the Holy Ghost in the Old and New Testaments.

"Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a Son: and His name shall be called Emmanuel" (Isa. 7/14).

"For a Child is born to us, and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulders: and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace. His empire shall be multiplied, and there shall be no end of peace. He shall sit upon the throne of David, and upon His kingdom: to establish it and strengthen it with judgment and with justice, from henceforth and forever" (Isa. 9/6, 7).

"Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above: and let the clouds rain the just. Let the earth be opened and bud forth a Saviour" (Isai. 45/7).

"And in the sixth month, the angel Gabriel was sent from God into a city of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David: and the virgin's name was Mary. . . . And the angel said to her: fear not, Mary, for

thou hast found grace with God. Behold thou shalt conceive in thy womb and shalt bring forth a Son: and thou shalt call His name Jesus. He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of David His father: and He shall reign in the house of Jacob forever. And of His kingdom there shall be no end. . . . And Mary said: Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it done unto me according to Thy word" (Luke 1/*Passim*).

"Behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a Son: and thou shalt call His name Jesus. For He shall save His people from their sins. Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: *Behold a virgin shall be with Child and bring forth a Son: and they shall call His name Emmanuel*, which being interpreted is, *God with us*" (Matt. 1/20-23).

"And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda: out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be the ruler in Israel" (Micheas 5/21).

"And it came to pass that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born Son and wrapped Him up in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger" (Luke 2/6, 7).