

# Giving voice to our deepest longing, awakening hope

Most Catholics can probably sing the first verse of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” by heart. The tune is even more familiar than the words, and it signals clearly that the season of Advent has arrived.

I thought it might be helpful this week to take a look at the lyrics of this familiar song, because each of them teaches something about the coming of our Savior.

The verses of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” have their origin in the seven antiphons, or introductory refrains, which precede the praying of the Magnificat (Mary’s prayer in Luke 1:46–55) during Evening Prayer December 17–23. These seasonal refrains are called the “O Antiphons,” because each begins with the word “O,” followed by the invocation of the Messiah under one of his titles.

Historians believe that the “O Antiphons” were first used in the Middle Ages at Rome. In some parts of Europe, there were more than seven, and in cathedrals and monasteries the singing of these antiphons was a solemn occasion.

## ‘YHWH saves’

Each of the antiphons in itself is a beautiful prayer of longing for the Savior. As Christmas approaches, I encourage you to spend some time with the images evoked by them, by reflecting on the Scripture passages I will offer below.

December 17: “O Wisdom, O holy Word of God (Sir 24:3; Jn 1), you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care (Wis 8:1). Come and show your people the way to salvation (Is 40:3–5).”

Jesus is the Word spoken by the Father, through whom everything has been created. He is the Truth which governs all things, the Way we walk to salvation.

December 18: “O Sacred Lord of ancient Israel (Ex 6), who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 3), who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free (Exodus 6:6).”

In an astounding revelation, the Lord made himself known to Moses, and told him his name, YHWH (Yahweh), “I Am Who Am.” He sends us his Son, Jesus, whose name means “YHWH saves.”

December 19: “O Flower of Jesse’s



ARCHBISHOP  
J. PETER  
SARTAIN

stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples (Is 11:1–10; Rom 15:12); kings stand silent in your presence (Is 5:15); the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid (Hb 2:3; Heb 10:37).”

Once, when all hope seemed to have been lost for God’s people, and the tree of Jesse (the dynasty of King David, Jesse’s son) seemed to have been chopped to a lifeless stump, Isaiah prophesied that even from such a stump, God would bring forth a blossom, “a flower of Jesse’s stem.” Can he not do the same for us when all seems lost?

## Gate of heaven

December 20: “O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of heaven (Is 22:22; Rev 3:7): come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death; and lead your captive people into freedom (Is 42:7; Ps 107:14; Lk 1:79).”

Only the Messiah can open and shut the gate into the kingdom, and we pray that he set us free from whatever binds us and holds us back from true spiritual growth and freedom.

December 21: “O Radiant Dawn (Zec 6:12), splendor of eternal light (Heb 1:3), sun of justice (Mal 4:2): come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death (Lk 1:78–79).”

When Christ returns at the end of time, the light of his coming will scatter all darkness, and “Night will be no more, nor will they need light from lamp or sun, for the Lord God shall give them light, and they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5).

December 22: “O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart (Hg 2:8); O Keystone (Is 28:16) of the mighty arch of man (Eph 2:14), come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust (Gn 2:7).”

Christ is the “arch” between all nations, which brings them together and reconciles them forever, just as his father had originally planned for creation. “For he is our peace, he who made both one

## DO YOU HAVE AN INTENTION FOR ARCHBISHOP SARTAIN’S PRAYER LIST?

You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain’s Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.

and broke down the dividing wall of enmity” (Eph 2:4). We also call upon him to heal the divisions in our families and workplaces.

## Forever ‘Emmanuel’

December 23: “O Emmanuel (Is 7:14, 8:8; Mt 1:18–25, 28:20), king and law-giver (Is 33:22), desire of the nations (Gn 49:10), Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God.”

Jesus Christ is forever “Emmanuel,” “God is with us.” He is the fulfillment of the true hopes of every woman and man, even those who have not heard the good news. In him alone do we find freedom, and because of him we are never alone.

Simply by quietly reciting the antiphons several times, we can awaken within ourselves the desire for the Lord to come. Calling upon him in this way, we evoke the faith-filled history of our ancestors and give voice to our deepest longing.

I have a feeling that we will also awaken our awareness of needs and hopes we have long suppressed.

Come, Lord, and be with us. We need you and love you more than words and music can say. Amen.



Some of the “O Antiphons” in the 14th-century “Poissy Antiphonal.”