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THE GREAT O ANTIPHONS, VISUALIZED A Parish Rite for Advent

- 1 For several years now, I've been consumed with a strange obsession. How may the traditional Great O Antiphons of Advent be used and visualized in parish worship?
- 2 An antiphon is a kind of refrain, a sound byte, you might say, often sung in worship during the course of the singing of the Day's psalm. A choir or cantor sings the psalm verses, and the people participate by singing a recurring refrain, or antiphon, as a response after a select number of verses.
- 3 It's quite a lovely experience, partly because it's steadfastly congregational, and also because the antiphon can be taught and learned on the spot, without any reading of text or music whatsoever. Too much of our worship these days, in too many Christian assemblies, depends on the people being able to read. Big mistake, in these days of immigrant congregations with meagre grasp of English literacy.
- 4 The Great O Antiphons are distinct to the season of Advent, and you may find all seven of them in our current Lutheran hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, at hymn 257, O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. As you can see, they sum up many of the themes of the Advent season, and provide a kind of job description for God's coming Messiah, in the days just before Christmas Eve.
- 5 Only cathedrals and the largest of Christian parishes will be able to use these antiphons in daily worship, as intended in an earlier age. Here's what my imagination proposes as a way to visualize these splendid metaphors in parish worship. And as a way to involve young people in non-speaking roles as acolytes. My notes below suggest the use of resources I have at hand in my local parish; you'd have to adapt.
- 6 On the Third and Fourth Sundays in Advent, the congregation sings the appropriate verses of hymn 257, as Hymn of the Day, in parallel organum. This would have to be taught, on the spot: choir men sing the identical words and melody, but a fifth below that of the congregation and choir women. It's the very beginning of harmony in Western music, and sounds at first distinctly weird. But when the ear becomes accustomed to parallel organum, it's marvellous!
- 7 As each stanza is sung, youth from the parish bring forward the appropriate "visual aid" noted below and arrange them, one by one, in a kind of artful still life in the chancel where they are visible to

all. The visualization or still life remains in place throughout the weekdays after December 17, and throughout the Christmas season.

8 Young people serve here as wordless acolytes, vested in white albs. And they'd be carefully rehearsed beforehand.

9 The First Antiphon: O Emmanuel / December 16: Note that the first stanza of hymn 257 introduces the entire sequence of antiphons, and is repeated again as last stanza. The visual aid here is my processional icon of Christ the Teacher. I bought an inexpensive colour reproduction on paper, had it dry mounted to a wooden board I had previously painted dull black on the back and edges, and gold on the front, attached tiny bells to the bottom edge, and finished with a brass screw eye at the top. This is carried on my processional bamboo pole, and stood upright in place in one of my cast iron processional banner stands.

10 Aside: Christian congregations do well to accumulate, over the years, a collection of processional banners and processional icons, as well as poles to carry them, and flag stands or banner stands to support them once in place. I'm a shameless trash-picker, and my parish now owns three or four splendid bamboo poles, six, seven, and even eight feet in length, each topped with a gold painted wooden finial and a brass cup hook to hold the hook eye of a banner or icon.

11 At many hardware stores you can even find inexpensive ribbons for your poles. Called surveyor's tape, they come in spools in a fine array of colours: red, orange, yellow, green, light blue and dark blue! I often fix such plastic ribbons to the top of each pole, in seven foot lengths. They flutter nicely in processions!

12 The Second Antiphon: O Wisdom / December 17: The visual aid here is a large handsome Bible or Lectionary, bound in leather, perhaps with hubbed spine and gold page edges, embellished ("vested"?) ideally with at least three fabric page markers of brocade or tapestry ribbon, each ribbon ending in a cross or crucifix or "holy medal" or small bell or gold tassel. This is carried by a youth on a blue or purple pillow or cushion – Advent's colours – with gold tassels at the corners, and placed reverently on a low table or flower stand.

13 Aside: Every book used in the public worship of the church, whether Bible, Lectionary, Altar Book – or even three ring binder! – should be "worthy of its work" in Christian worship. Never a flimsy paper leaflet, but a large, handsome, visually impressive volume, properly "vested" for the solemn occasion of its service, with fabric page markers of brocade or tapestry ribbons, each ending in a cross, or crucifix, or "holy medal", or gold tassel, or tiny bell.

14 Parishes neglecting this kind of refinement are not properly honouring the solemn occasions of their service in Christian public worship. These are holy moments, folks! Other worshippers present will be conscious of that reverence due, whether or not their leaders are!

15 And it's not simply the concern of a fussy elite. These refinements – of long tradition in the church – are also almost always a matter of function: Those ribbon page markers? They can actually help to locate a proper page. And those ribbon-ending tassels or bells or crosses? They

help prevent your fingers from slipping off the ribbon!

16 An Important Principle: In Christian public worship, here is the question worship leaders must always ask, of themselves and of the artifacts they handle: "Is this worthy of its work in worship?"

17 Alternatively, the visualization could consist of a handsome antique oil lamp, carried by a youth and placed on a small table or plant stand. A burning lamp has been a symbol of wisdom or knowledge since antiquity: Psalm 119:105: "Your word is a lamp to my feet..." and other such references.

18 The Third Antiphon: O Lord of Might / December 18: The visualization, here in my own parish, is my twin Tables of the Law. My choice here is prompted by the reference in verse three of the hymn.

19 Aside: On a neighbourhood walk many years ago I discovered, at a building site, two planks of three inch blue construction Styrofoam about to be discarded. With the permission of the construction foreman, I took them home, sawed them into panels of about 3" x 18" x 32", each with an arch at the top, after the manner of the iconic Tables of the Law you see in countless New Yorker cartoons. With an Exacto knife and the aid of my interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament, I incised the correct Hebrew lettering on each plank, and painted them so as to look like stone. (I was preparing for yet another Biblical play!) I have them still!

20 Alternatively – in Canada at least – the visualization could be a Lord Mayor's Chain of Office, or a Halloween costume shop equivalent, mounted on a blue or purple pillow or cushion with gold tassels sewn at the pillow's corners. This would be placed reverently on a small table or plant stand so as to be visible to all.

21 The Fourth Antiphon: O Branch of Jesse / December 19: The visualization here: A potted plant, perhaps a Christmas poinsettia in red or white, in a blue or purple ceramic pot.

22 Alternatively, a small bonsai tree in a handsome pot. Again, this would be placed on a low flower stand so as to be visible to all.

23 The Fifth Antiphon: O Key of David / December 20: The visualization: A huge antique iron key. Friends found one in a flea market. Here it is hung on a blue or purple ribbon, and worn around the neck of a parish youth, who enters and stands at attention facing the people during the singing of the verse, then leaves the key on a blue or purple pillow or cushion ornamented with gold tassels. Alternatively, a key could be cut out of plywood.

24 The Sixth Antiphon: O Dayspring / December 21: The visual aid: Ideally, the congregation's Vesper Candle, mounted in a handsome floor length brass or wooden candlestick, carried by a youth and placed within the still life. The symbolism in Vespers is that of a candle's light as prolepsis of the next day's dawn. Hence the Hebrew day begins with the evening before.

25 Alternatively, the congregation's Pascal Candle could be used, carried in and placed within the still life in its floor length candlestick. The Paschal Candle is essentially a Vesper light.

26 The Seventh Antiphon: O King of Nations / December 22: The visualization: A crown. I made one for yet another Biblical play of two plastic margarine tubs with the bottoms cut out, their sides split and joined with brass paper fasteners to provide a wider circumference, then spray painted gold, and studded with still more brass paper fasteners and fake jewels, and carried in on a blue or purple pillow or cushion adorned with gold tassels, and placed reverently on a low table.

27 The Eighth Antiphon: O Emmanuel / December 23: The processional icon of Christ the Teacher as in 9 above.

28 Anyone out there with some better ideas?

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