



Music for Advent



Emergence of the “Roman” Advent

The development of a “season” of Advent within the Church of Rome evolved gradually over several centuries. There is clear evidence of the celebration of Christ’s birth on 25th December in Rome as early as the year 335, and that this celebration marked the beginning of the Church year. (See the *Philocalian Calendar* – Chronograph 354). By the end of the 4th century the practice of a pre-Christmas fast of a single day had been established. If the sermons of Pope Leo I († 461) are taken as a guide, then we can say that the focus of the feast was on the reconciliation of human nature with God through the person of Jesus, who, while being truly divine remained fully divine.

December 25th was not the only date on which Christ’s birth was celebrated by Christians. In the East, 6th January marked the combined celebration of Christ’s birth, his baptism and the Wedding Feast of Cana – all “epiphanies” of the divine nature of the human Jesus. In northern Italy both dates were in use in the 4th and 5th centuries, while in north Africa the December date marked Christ’s birth while that of January marked his revelation to the Gentiles through the visit of the Magi.

In Spain, there is little evidence of a December celebration of Christmas, but we do know from the decree of the Council of Saragossa (380) that every Christian was urged to go daily to church from December 17 until the Theophany (Jan 6). This may have been preparation for Christmas but it might also have been a period of preparation for baptisms at Epiphany. By contrast, the feast instituted by Bishop Perpetuus of Tours (†490) included the Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays from the feast of St Martin of Tours on 11th November until 24 December, and was thus clearly a pre-Christmas fast. Known as “St Martin’s Lent” this period was ascetical in character. A century later, the second Synod of Macon (581) in present day France issued a similar decree.

The Roman practice of Ember Days – days of prayer, almsgiving and fasting from wheat, wine and oil on the first Saturday of the fourth, seventh and tenth months – was already established by the end of the 3rd century. The nine Ember Day sermons of Pope Leo I for December make no mention of the soon-to-be-celebrated birth of Christ, but he does note that abstinence in this life is a good preparation for the final judgment and the second coming of Christ.

Clearly, there were different practices in different regions of the Church in both the East and the West. The theological context influenced the way a particular church prepared to celebrate the birth of Christ. Local practices leading up to the feast were distinct and could be either liturgical or ascetical in character. Although none could be described as a “season of Advent” they undoubtedly influenced the character of the Advent that finally emerged in Rome.

Advent in Rome

By concentrating on the readings and prayers prescribed for the weeks leading up to Christmas, the renowned scholar Antoine Chavasse determined that Rome began to celebrate a recognizable Advent in the second half of the 6th century. The readings from the December Ember Days were simply incorporated into the Advent “season.”

The “coming” – *adventus* – of Christ referred to in the prayers could be interpreted as referring to either of both his coming in the flesh or his coming in glory at the end of time. The mystery of the Incarnation, by which the Son of God assumed human flesh and revealed God to all humanity, has its culmination in the final coming of Christ in glory when the created world comes to an end and God again becomes all in all. As one scholar so aptly put it: “The coming of Christ in the flesh and his coming in glory at the end of time are but two phases of the one redemptive coming” (Jean Hild). In the time between the first and second comings of Christ we, his followers, reflect of the Incarnation and look forward to eternal glory.

The call of John the Baptist, precursor to Christ in his first coming, to his followers to “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,” was echoed in the prayers of Advent:

**Gird the loins of our minds
by the power of your divine strength,
so that at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
we may come to the banquet of eternal life
and may be worthy to receive from him
the promised celestial home.**

Gelasian Sacramentary, #1131

This eschatological emphasis is common in the Advent prayers at this time in Rome, and it is clear that it is the *second* coming of Christ for which Christians must be alert and prepared.

The earliest surviving Lectionary of the Roman Church, the *Capitulary of Würzburg*, reflects roman practice during the first half of the 7th century. Of the five Epistles for the Sundays of Advent, four focus on the second coming of Christ and the last judgment. But this is not something to fear, since the goodness, mercy and steadfastness of god bring hope to the faithful Christian and give strength to overcome temptation.

The Gospel passages read on the Sundays in the weeks leading up to Christmas included

Mt 21:1-9 the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem;

- Lk 21:25-33 the celestial signs that will indicate the coming of the Son of Mas with power and great glory;
- Mt 11:2-10 John the Baptist's question to Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come?"
- Jn 1:19-28 the baptism of Jesus;
- Jn 6:5-14 the multiplication of the loaves and fishes.

It is only in the last *days* before Christmas that Lk 1:26-38 (the Annunciation) and Lk 1:39-46 (the Visitation) are proclaimed. Clearly, the focus during the Advent weeks are on Christ as the Messiah and his second coming, while that on the final days is on his coming in the flesh. It is only in later centuries that there is a shift to an Advent that includes in its *Sunday readings* consideration not only of Christ's coming in glory but his hisotircal coming in the flesh as God-with –us.

It is worth noting that the strictly penitential character of the Gallic "St Martin's Lent" is not incorporated into the Roman Advent at this time; the Baptist's call for repentance and the encouragement to ascetic living of the Roman Ember Days are sufficient.

Advent Today

The *General Norms for the Liturgical Year and the Calendar (GNLYC)* observes that

Advent has a twofold character: a season to prepare for Christmas when Christ's first coming is remembered; as a season when that remembrance directs the mind and heart to await Christ's second coming at the end of time. Advent is thus a period for devout and joyful expectation. (#39)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* puts it this way:

The current practice of the Church is to celebrate both the historical 'coming' of Christ and to anticipate his final coming: "When the Church celebrates the Advent liturgy each year, she makes present the ancient expectancy of the Messiah, for by sharing in the long preparation for our Saviour's coming, the faithful renew their ardent desire for his second coming." (#524)

The Liturgy of Advent

The four weeks of Advent are in *two stages*:

- a) the beginning of Advent until December 16
- b) 17-24 December

Each of these stages has its own Advent Preface. Preface I is used until December 16 and Preface II takes over on December 17.

Advent Preface I:

Christ assumed at his first coming the lowliness of human flesh, and so fulfilled the design you formed long ago, and opened for us the way to eternal salvation, that, when he comes again in glory and majesty and all is at last made manifest, we who watch for that day may inherit the great promise in which we now dare to hope.

Advent Preface II:

For all the oracles of the prophets foretold him, the Virgin Mother longed for him with love beyond all telling, John the Baptist sang of his coming and proclaimed his presence when he came.

It is by his gift that already we rejoice at the mystery of the Nativity, so that he may find us watchful in prayer and exultant in his praise.

The Advent Readings.

Throughout the 3-year cycle, the **First Reading** each Sunday presents the chief prophecies about Jesus the Messiah (from Isaiah, Baruch and Zephaniah), with the most important being read on the *fourth* Sunday of Advent.

The **Gospels** focus on the same themes for each of the three years:

Sunday 1 – watch, be ready

Sunday 2 & 3 – John the Baptist

Sunday 4 – The Annunciation to Mary/Joseph, the Visitation

The **Second Readings** show how the prophecies (of the First Readings) have been fulfilled in Jesus, and point forward to the coming of the Lord, which will be a day of salvation for all peoples and a day of joy for those who have awaited his coming with love. They also show how the faithful are to live as they wait for Christ to come again.

Music for Advent

During Advent, the *Gloria* is omitted, but the *Alleluia* and its verse are retained. The mood is one of *joyful anticipation*, with just a slight penitential flavor. Since the *Gloria* is omitted, this is a good opportunity to have the congregation learn the simple *chant setting* of the other parts of the Mass. (See CWB II – nos. 4, 11, 12, 17)

Responsorial Psalms

If your parish is accustomed to singing the Psalm then it is good if the Lectionary psalm is used each Sunday of Advent. If your parish is not accustomed to singing the Psalm, you could consider using one of the *Common Psalms* for Advent (Psalm 25 or 85) right through the Advent season. (These psalms correspond to the First Sunday Year C and the Second Sunday Year B in the Lectionary.)

Psalm settings by Australian Composers:

Colin Smith: *Responsorial Psalms* (3 vols)

Jenny O'Brien: *Psalms for the Sundays of Year A/B/C*

Kathleen Boschetti: *Songs of God's People* (3 vols)

Christopher Willcock: *Psalms for Feasts and Seasons* (the 22 Common Psalms)

Paul Mason: *Psalms for All Time* (22 Common Psalms + 7 others)

Richard Connolly: *Praise the Lord my Soul* (22 Common Psalms + 13 others)

All the relevant Church documents indicate that the Psalm *ought to be sung* – at the very least the *antiphon* should be sung, since this is the kernel of the psalm, and the phrase that can be a source of prayerful reflection both during the Mass itself and on the days that follow.

The hymn *O come, O come Emmanuel* has been part of the Church's heritage since the 8th century, and is based on the "O" antiphons that invoke Christ through the use of Old Testament symbols. Strictly speaking, it should be kept for the second stage of Advent (17-24 December), although for many Catholics it heralds the arrival of Advent! Another hymn that uses the "O" antiphons is Marty Haugen's *My Soul in Stillness Waits*.

One way to incorporate the VENI EMMANUEL chant is to use the *Advent Alleluia* (CWB II No. 42). Another way to remind the people that Advent is here is to use *Come, O Jesus, come O Lord* (CWB II no. 65) as a response in the Prayer of the Faithful.

Develop an "Advent repertoire" of hymns in your parish, so that when they return each year the congregation will not only be familiar with them but will gradually absorb them into their very bones. With this in mind, choose your music very carefully! N.B. It may be that several "repertoires" need to be developed for the one parish, *according to the needs of the congregation* at different Mass times.

There are 21 items in the Advent section of *CWB II*, ranging from the Breviary chant "Eternal God who made the stars" (no. 236 in both English and Latin) from the 9th century, to "O Emmanuel" (No. 241) written for children by Michael Mangan in 1994. While there are many other hymns that are suitable for Advent, those included in *CWB II* are a good cross-section of older and newer items.

Few recently written Advent hymns include the eschatological aspect of this season. Christopher Tietze has taken the Entrance Antiphons and their psalm and developed metrical settings of these as Entrance Hymns for Advent. (*Introit Hymns for the Church Year*, © 2005 World Library Publications, Franklin Park IL)

Choral Works.

For those parishes with choirs, the First Sunday of Advent presents the opportunity to sing Mendelssohn's *Lift thine eyes* (perhaps while the procession of gifts is taking place.) This can be downloaded from the Choral Public Domain Library: <http://www.cpd.org> and freely copied, distributed and performed.

Options for a choir on the 2nd Sunday of Advent include *Es ist ein Ros entsprungen* (*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming*) by Michael Praetorius – in the public domain and freely download-able and *A Tender Shoot* by Otto Goldschmidt, downloadable at www.stcatherines.org/choir/Goldschmidt_A_Tender_Shoot.pdf

Marty Haugen's *My Soul in Stillness Waits* (CWB II, no. 237) works beautifully as a post-Communion hymn for the 3rd and 4th Sundays of Advent.

Particularly suitable for choirs on the 4th Sunday of Advent Year A is *The Angel Gabriel* (CWB II, no 247). Another choral work is Charles Giffen's *Let the clouds rain down* which, while using the text of the Entrance Antiphon, could be sung by the choir during the procession of gifts. It is in the public domain and downloadable at <http://www.cpd.org> .

Conclusion

The Readings and Prayers of Advent provide a particularly rich theological tapestry, bringing before us the “comings” of Christ in history, in mystery, and in majesty.

Let us ensure that our choice of music enables this to be displayed to full advantage!

Jennifer R. O'Brien
Liturgy Educator
Office for Worship, Adelaide
127 South Road,
Thebarton SA 5031

Phone: (08) 8152 7805

Email: jobrien@ow.adelaide.catholic.org.au