**Christmas Traditions: Tree, Creche, O Antiphons**

**Christmas Tree**

Catholic tradition links the origin of the Christmas tree with Saint Boniface. Born in Enlgand in the late 7th century, he became a Benedictine monk at a young age. He experienced an ever-growing desire to be a missionary to the Germanic lands, where the Gospel had not yet fully been preached. Knowing of Pope Gregory II’s commitment to evangelization in that region, the young monk travelled to Rome, seeking the support of the pope. Pope Gregory II responded eagerly to the young man’s requests, and sent him to bring the light of Christ to that region (Steve Weidenkopf, “St. Boniface and the Christmas Tree., Catholic Answers. Pub. 5 Jun 2014. Ret. 29 Nov. 2014.).

In his missionary work, Boniface became aware of a practice involving the worship of the god Thor. The people of the village would gather at a great oak tree dedicated to the god and offer sacrifice. On Christmas Eve, Boniface, along with a group of his followers, cut down the great “Thunder Oak” in the presence of the people. Boniface preached that Thor was dead, and called them to turn to Christ, the true and only Savior of the world. Pointing to an evergreen he said:

This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace, for your houses are built of the fir. It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are ever green. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood, but loving gifts and rites of kindness (Fr. William P. Saunders, “The Christmas Tree,” *Holy Spirit Interactive*, ret. 29 Nov. 2014).

**Christmas Creche**

The origin of the Creche (French for “crib” or “manger”), or Nativity (from the Latin for “birth”) Scene, is connected to Saint Francis of Assisi. In the year 1223, Francis was in Grecio preparing for the Midnight Mass for Christmas. Realizing that the local chapel would be too small for the people, Francis set up the altar at the mouth of a rock formation. Before the altar, he created the first Nativity Scene: bringing animals and setting up a crib for the Christ child. St. Bonaventure, one of Francis’ biographers, relates the witness of John of Grecio, who said that during the Mass a child appeared in the manger, and, with great reverence, Francis raised the child in his arms and embraced him (Fr. William Saunders, “St. Francis and the Christmas Creche.” *Catholic Education Resource Center,* retrieved 29 Nov. 2014).

**O Antiphons**

Antiphons are “short verses sung before and after a psalm or canticle to determine its musical mode or to provide the key to the liturgical or mystical meaning” (“Antiphon,” Dictionary, *Catholic Culture*). Every day during Evening Prayer (Vespers) of the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church prays the great Gospel Canticle of Mary, the *Magnificat* (see Luke 1:46-55). Based on the day and liturgical season, a particular antiphon is recited or sung before and after the praying of the *Magnificat*.

During the Octave before Christmas (December 17-24), the antiphons for the *Magnificat* each invoke Christ under one of the various Messianic titles. Fr. William Saunders explains:

The importance of O Antiphons is twofold: Each one highlights a title for the Messiah: *O Sapientia* (O Wisdom), *O Adonai* (O Lord), *O Radix Jesse* (O Root of Jesse), *O Clavis David* (O Key of David), *O Oriens* (O Rising Sun), *O Rex Gentium* (O King of the Nations), and *O Emmanuel*. Also, each one refers to the prophecy of Isaiah of the coming of the Messiah. Let’s now look at each antiphon with just a sample of Isaiah’s related prophecies:

*O Sapientia*: O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come and show your people the way to salvation. Isaiah had prophesied, The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord. (11:2-3), and Wonderful is His counsel and great is His wisdom. (28:29).

*O Adonai*: O sacred Lord of ancient Israel, who showed yourself to Moses in the burning bush, who gave him the holy law on Sinai mountain: come, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free. Isaiah had prophesied, But He shall judge the poor with justice, and decide aright for the lands afflicted. He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips. (11:4-5); and Indeed the Lord will be there with us, majestic; yes the Lord our judge, the Lord our lawgiver, the Lord our king, he it is who will save us. (33:22).

*O Radix Jesse*: O Flower of Jesses stem, you have been raised up as a sign for all peoples; kings stand silent in your presence; the nations bow down in worship before you. Come, let nothing keep you from coming to our aid. Isaiah had prophesied, But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom. (11:1), and A On that day, the root of Jesse, set up as a signal for the nations, the Gentiles shall seek out, for his dwelling shall be glorious. (11:10). Remember also that Jesse was the father of King David, and Micah had prophesied that the Messiah would be of the house and lineage of David and be born in David’s city, Bethlehem (Micah 5:1).

*O Clavis David*: O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel controlling at your will the gate of Heaven: 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. Isaiah had prophesied, AI will place the Key of the House of David on His shoulder; when he opens, no one will shut, when he shuts, no one will open. (22:22), and His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David’s throne, and over His kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever. (9:6).

*O Oriens*: O Radiant Dawn, splendor of eternal light, sun of justice: come, shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death. Isaiah had prophesied, The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shown. (9:1).

*O Rex Gentium*: O King of all the nations, the only joy of every human heart; O Keystone of the mighty arch of man, come and save the creature you fashioned from the dust. Isaiah had prophesied, For a child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. (9:5), and He shall judge between the nations, and impose terms on many peoples. They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; one nation shall not raise the sword against another, nor shall they train for war again. (2:4).

*O Emmanuel*: O Emmanuel, king and lawgiver, desire of the nations, Savior of all people, come and set us free, Lord our God. Isaiah had prophesied, The Lord himself will give you this sign: the Virgin shall be with child, and bear a son, and shall name him Emmanuel. (Fr. William Saunders, “What are the O Antiphons?”, *Catholic Education Resource Center*, retrieved 29 Nov. 2014).