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The Christmas Novena

John E. Rybolt, C.M.

The traditional Christmas Novena, celebrated in the churches and chapels of the Vincentians and the Daughters of Charity, has come to mean “Christmas” for the members of the two Communities and to the many others who mark these nine days of prayer with them. Even though the celebration of novenas has presently fallen somewhat out of favor, the Christmas Novena continues—updated, and in the vernacular, to be sure.

History and Development

Carlo Antonio Vacchetta (1665-1747), an Italian Vincentian living in Turin, has received the credit of composing the novena, his work following on centuries of tradition. With greater lay involvement in the life of the Church in the baroque period after the Reformation, popular piety expressed itself in numerous new devotions. Periods of prayer leading up to the festivals of saints were commonly observed, often lasting three, six, or nine days. Shrines noted for special devotion to Our Lord and the Blessed Mother also commemorated feasts and seasons with set days of prayer, often in the popular language.

A special novena in preparation for Christmas was known at Rome from 1618 on. This devotion consisted in the reading and singing of verses from the prophets, “Novena dei versetti.” This format probably suggested to Vacchetta the possibility of expanding the devotion along

the lines of the official celebrations of matins and vespers. Vacchetta had a strong personal interest in the ceremonies and music of the Church. He taught liturgy and chant to the student-priests in his charge; and composed novenas in honor of the Holy Spirit for Pentecost and in preparation for the feast of the Immaculate Conception (patronal feast of the Vincentian church). For some reason, his printed biography, published in 1751, fails to mention the Christmas Novena, for which he is currently best known.

The occasion for the Christmas Novena as we know it was offered by Gabriella Marolles delle Lanze, Marchesa of Caluso, twice widowed and quite devout. She frequented the Vincentian church, had Vincentian spiritual directors, and assisted the Community financially. Despite the silence of his biography, other sources affirm that Carlo Antonio Vacchetta, together with his confreres Giovanni Amosso and Sebastiano Valfre, set out to encourage the Marchesa's piety by composing, or possibly revising, a novena in preparation for Christmas. Its first recorded appearance took place in 1720 at the Vincentian church in Turin. The Marchesa must have appreciated the novena, since at her death she bequeathed her fortune to the Vincentians, further stipulating that 5000 lire be set aside for its annual celebration.

Since that time, the Christmas Novena has spread throughout Italy, first through the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity, and later also through the Salesians of Don Bosco. It has spread elsewhere in the world due to the missionary work of the three Communities. American Vincentians are surprised to learn that, apart from the influence of their Italian confreres or the occasional American missionary, the novena is practically unknown outside the United States.

When the first Vincentians came to America in 1816, they undoubtedly brought the Christmas Novena with them. Notices of its celebration are scarce, but it possibly made its appearance here as early as 1816 at the seminary in Saint Thomas, near Bardstown, where the confreres spent their first American winter. If not then, it must have begun shortly afterwards, in 1819 or 1820, at the Barrens in Missouri since the early Italian confreres took great pains to celebrate the liturgy with suitable music. Bishop Rosati in his notes on their 1816 ocean crossing remarks that even aboard ship, "on Sundays and festivals, was sung in the Gregorian Chant, in two choirs." Felix De Andreis, the first American Superior, commented in a letter to Rosati on the care taken to observe Holy Week in Saint Louis with proper music. As teachers of ecclesiastical students, the pioneer Vincentians likewise sought to provide suitable teachers for the rites and music of the Church.

The music of the novena, apparently going back to Vacchetta himself, was generally sung in unison, in one voice. This continued until the 1920s when Professor Matthew P. Becker, a faculty member of Kenrick Seminary in Saint Louis, prepared a four-part version for men's voices. The encouragement for this came, it appears, from his fellow faculty-member, Father Charles-Leon Souvay, C.M., an accomplished musician and interested in all things Vincentian. The Becker version remained most commonly in use until the time of liturgical renovation after the Second Vatican Council. A 1940 revision by Clarence Corcoran, C.M., also of Kenrick Seminary, was prepared for the publishing house of B. Herder in St. Louis; Corcoran added small corrections and other indications for performance. Another Saint Louisan, Martin B. Helfriegel, long a champion of popular liturgical piety, took the novena in hand and, probably in

the 1930s,—with Souvay's help—prepared an English version. This was celebrated by the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood, whose chaplain Hellriegel had been for many years. He also introduced it in his own parish, Holy Cross, and later saw to its printing and wider distribution.

After the Council, several other versions appeared both in Italy and in the United States, adapting the distinctive parts of the novena to a more liturgical style. This revised novena was held in the vernacular, usually shortened musically, but lengthened with biblical readings.

Form of the Novena

Vacchetta modeled his own version loosely on matins and vespers as celebrated in his day. It should be noted that he rarely, if ever, quoted entirely from liturgical texts. Since his work was popular and unofficial, although sung in Latin, he probably chose to modify the official texts and to combine the structure of those two liturgical hours. This conjecture is strengthened as one attempts to ferret out all the sources for the Vacchetta text.

The traditional novena took the following form:

1. **Invitatory:** *Regem venturum Dominum*, a verse taken from matins of the Advent season. This was repeated after each of the following “prophecies.”

2. **Prophecies:** These are eight passages of varying length, skillfully composed from several sources, mainly antiphons and the long responsories of matins. These in turn are based on biblical texts, often with some poetic elaboration. Structurally, the prophecies took the place of the invitatory psalm of matins.

3. **Canticle:** *Laetentur Caeli*, a pastiche of verses taken from the biblical books of Psalms and Isaiah. One

verse, however, seems to be Vacchetta's own composition. This canticle takes the place of the five psalms normally recited at vespers. A close look at this composition will show that it has neither development nor movement; the repeated *Veni* sets a religious tone appropriate to the occasion.

4. **Lesson:** *Praecursor pro nobis*, loosely based on Hebrews 6 and 7, and thus not a biblical reading in the strict sense. This brief reading keeps its traditional place in the Office, following the psalmody.

5. **Hymn:** *En clara vox*, likewise a composite, coming partly from the hymn of the same name proper to Advent lauds and from the hymn for Christmas lauds. Its doxology, in turn, comes from the doxology at Prime during the year. In the liturgy of the hours before the recent revision, the hymn followed the scripture reading.

6. **Antiphons for the Magnificat:** arranged according to the day of the month. That for December 16 comes from vespers of Monday of the second week in Advent; those for December 17-23 are the Major Antiphons, known popularly as the O Antiphons from their opening word. These have been, and continue to be, used as the regular antiphons for the Magnificat at vespers for those days. On the final day, December 24, Vacchetta chose the corresponding antiphon from vespers of Christmas eve.

7. **Magnificat:** This text follows the standard New Testament canticle (Luke 1:46-55) as given in the liturgical books, as well as its normal place in the liturgy.

8. **Collect and Dismissal:** The prayer does not appear among the approved collects for the season. It bears some resemblance to psalm verses, and is probably Vacchetta's own work. It has been customary, at least in the United States, for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament to conclude the novena.

Text and Sources

The traditional text is given, followed by its sources—either biblical, or more usually liturgical. The English translation comes from the version of David E. Windsor and Rory P. Cooney, published in Perryville, Missouri, about 1969.

INVITATORY

*Regem venturum Dominum,
venite, adoremus”*,

[Invitatory from Advent Matins]

*Soon comes our Lord and
King, Let us all adore Him.*

PROPHECIES

*1. Jucundare filia Sion, et
exulta satis filia Jerusalem;*

[Antiphon 2, Lauds, First Sunday in
Advent]

*ecce Dominus veniet et erit
in die illa lux magna;*

[Responsory, first nocturne of
Matins, Second Sunday in Advent;
also Antiphon 3, Lauds, First
Sunday in Advent]

*et stillabunt montes
dulcedinem, et colles fluent lac
et mel;*

[Responsory 3, Matins of Monday in
Advent; also Antiphon 1, Lauds,
First Sunday in Advent]

*quia veniet Propheta
magnus, et ipse renovabit
Jerusalem;*

[Antiphon 5, Lauds, First Sunday in
Advent]

*2. Ecce veniet Dominus, et
homo de domo David sedere in
throno;*

[Antiphon at Benedictus, Lauds,
First Friday in Advent]

Rejoice, O Daughter of
Sion and be happy, daughter of
Jerusalem. Because the Lord,
your lover, comes, and on that
day a light will shine from
heaven, and the mountains
shall be bathed in brightness;
and the hills will flow with milk
and honey, because a great
teacher is coming, and his new
law will make your city young
again.

Hear, my people, God will
come as a man to rule from the
throne of David. And when you

et videbitis et gaudebit cor vestrum;
[Lesson 3, Fourth Friday in Advent]

3. *Ecce veniet Dominus, protector noster, Sanctus Israel, coronam regni habens in capite suo, et dominabitur a mari usque ad mare, et a flumine usque ad terminos orbis terrarum.*
[Responsory 4, Matins, Second Sunday in Advent]

4. *Ecce apparebit Dominus, et non mentietur; si moram fecerit expecta eum, quia veniet, et non tardabit.*
[Antiphon 3, Lauds, Second Sunday in Advent]

5. *Descendet Dominus sicut pluvia in vellus; orietur in diebus ejus justitia et abundantia pacis, et adorabunt eum omnes reges terrae, omnes gentes servient ei.*
[Responsory 6, Matins, Third Week in Advent]

6. *Nascetur nobis parvulus et vocabitur Deus fortis; ipse sedebit super thronum David patris sui et imperabit, cujus potestas super humerum ejus.*
[Responsory 4, Matins, Fourth Week in Advent]

7. *Bethlehem, civitas Dei summi, ex te exiet Dominator Israel, et egressus ejus sicut a principio dierum aeternitatis, et magnificabitur in medio universae terrae, et pax erit in*

see him, your heart will shine and dance its joyful praises.

Hear me, Sion, the Lord our fortress comes, the Holy One of Israel. And He will wear the jeweled crown upon His head. And His kingdom shall extend from sea to sea, and from the Jordan to the farthest corners of the earth.

Be glad for the Lord will appear, and your Lord cannot deceive; if it should seem that he is late, then wait for Him. For He shall come when He is sure that you are ready.

As a rainfall from the clouds, the maker shall come down from heaven, and there shall grow from the fields of His rule, justice and God's holy peace. And kings from every land shall adore Him, all people will be glad to be His Nation.

Then shall a child be born for us, so weak—yet called the God of strength, to rule Jerusalem from the lost throne of his father David, the king of all kings whose right hand is the source of every power and strength.

Bethlehem! City of the Most High, from your midst shall come the ruler of all Israel, and this coming will be said to be like nothing since the foundation of the universe, and

terra nostra dum venerit.

[Responsory 2, Matins, Third Week
in Advent]

*8. Crastina die delebitur
iniquitas terrae, et regnabit
super nos Salvator mundi*

[Antiphon 3, Lauds, Vigil of
Christmas]

Response:

*Prope est jam Dominus,
venite, adoremus.*

[Invitatory, Third and Fourth
Weeks in Advent]

CANTICLE

*1. Laetentur coeli, et
exultet terra (Ps 95:11),
jubilate, montes, laudem (Isa
49:13)*

[Responsory 2, Matins, First
Monday in Advent]

*2. Erumpant montes
jucunditatem, et colles justitiam*

[Responsory 2, Matins, First
Tuesday in Advent]

*3. Quia Dominus noster
veniet, et pauperum suorum
miserebitur (Isa 49:13)*

[Responsory 1, Matins, First
Monday in Advent]

*4. Rorate, caeli, desuper et
nubes pluant justum. aperiat
terra, et germinet Salvatorem
(Isa 45:8)*

[Responsory 1, Matins, First
Tuesday in Advent]

all creation will sing out his
praises, and the long awaited
peace will settle on the earth,
when the creator shall
triumphant come.

Tomorrow all evil on earth
will be destroyed by Him, and
over us all reign the one who
comes to save the whole world.

This night Our Lord will
come, hasten to adore him.

Be happy, skies, and laugh,
O land, and join our praise of
God, O you mountains.

Break open, hillsides, in
your happiness, and echo tales
of Yahweh's mercy.

For we know now that he
comes at last, to his poor people
he shows his kindness.

Drop down dew, O clouds,
and rain the great anointed one
of God, let the earth break open
and bud forth the Savior.

5. *Memento nostri, Domine, et visita nos in salutari tuo* (Ps 105:4)
[Versicle and response, Sext, Third Sunday in Advent]

6. *Ostende nobis, Domine, misericordiam tuam, et salutare tuum da nobis.* (Ps 84:8)
[Response, Sext, Third Sunday in Advent]

7. *Emitte Agnum, Domine, dominatorem terrae; de petra deserti ad montem filiae Sion* (Isa 16:1)
[Antiphon 2, Lauds, Tuesday before Christmas]

8. *Veni ad liberandum nos, Domine, Deus virtutum, ostende faciem tuam, et salvi erimus* (Ps 79:4b)
[Response, Terce, Second Sunday in Advent]

9. *Veni, Domine, visitare nos in pace, ut laetemur coram te, corde perfecto*
[Probably written by author; has no apparent biblical or liturgical connections]

10. *Ut cognoscamus, Domine, in terra viam tuam, in omnibus gentibus salutare tuum* (Ps 66:3)
[Antiphon 3, Lauds, Tuesday before Christmas]

11. *Excita, Domine, potentiam tuam, et veni, ut*

Remember that we sin, O Lord, and come to us in your saving action.

Let all mankind know the mercy of your ways, and manifest to all your saving grace.

Send forth, O lord, your Lamb, the King of all the earth, from Petra of the desert to the daughter of Sion's mountain.

Come down and free us, Lord God of everlasting strength, show only your face, and all our earthly bonds will shatter like glass.

Come down, O Lord, and let your peace remain with us; that in your presence our hearts might some day laugh again.

Would that we could know your ways on earth, O Lord, then every land would know the Love that you alone know.

Arouse your might, O Lord, and come; free us now as

salvos facias nos (Ps 79:3)
[Responsory 7, Matins, Third
Sunday in Advent]

12. *Veni, Domine, et noli
tardare*
[Response, None, First Week in
Advent]

relaxa facinora plebi tuae
[Responsory 7, Matins, Third
Sunday in Advent]

13. *Utinam dirumperes
coelos et descenderes, a facie
tua montes defluerent* (Isa 64:1)
[Opening sentence, lesson 1,
Matins, Fourth Tuesday in Advent]

14. *Veni, et ostende nobis
faciem tuam, Domine, qui sedes
super Cherubim* (Ps 79:4 and 2)
[Brief Response, Terce, Fridays in
Advent]

LESSON

*Praecursor pro nobis
ingreditur, (Hbr 6:20) agnus
sine macula, (Exod 12:5)
secundum ordinem
Melchisedech, pontifex factus in
aeternum (Hbr 6:20) et in
saeculum saeculi. (Hbr 1:8)
Ipse est Rex justitiae, (Hbr 7:2)
cujus generatio (Hbr 7:6) non
habet finem. (Hbr 7:3?)*

once you led us from Babylon.

Hurry Lord, for we will die
if you delay; release your people
from the crimes which we
commit before your eyes.

If only the thunder would
rend the clouds, and you come
down to us; at your glance the
mountains would melt away.

Come and look upon us
with your loving eyes, O Lord,
you who rule creation from the
ranks of heavenly choirs.

The spotless Lamb has
come into the world for us, as
the vanguard of a new age, a
high priest forever as
Melchisedech ordained. He is
the just king of eternity, and the
children He begets will never
die.

HYMN

(Note on the sources: the first two verses are verses 1 and 3 of the hymn of the same name, proper to Advent lauds; and verses 3, 4, and 5 come from the hymn for Christmas lauds, "A solis ortu cardine." The doxology, in turn, comes from the doxology at Prime during the year.)

1. *En clara vox redarguit,
obscura quaeque personans;
procul fugentur somnia, ab alto
Jesus promicat.*

2. *En Agnus ad nos
mittitur, laxare gratis debitum;
omnes simul cum lacrymis,
precemur indulgentiam.*

3. *Beatus auctor saeculi,
servile corpus induit; ut carne
carnem liberans, ne perderet
quos condidit.*

4. *Castae parentis viscera,
caelestis intrat gratia; venter
puellae bajulat, secreta quae
non noverat.*

5. *Domus pudici pectoris,
templum repente fit Dei; intacta
nesciens virum, concepit alvo
fillum.*

6. *Deo Patri sit gloria,
ejusque soli filio, cum Spiritu
Paraclito, in saeculorum
saecula. Amen.*

A shout at dawn awakens man, and drives away the spell of night; behold, dreams flee before the dawn, as Jesus comes down from his throne.

A lamb in sacrifice is sent, to make return for all our sins. With tears together let us pray, that mercy rises with the day.

Eternal One who fashioned time, you took our form in Mary's womb. So those whom you had made might be, through human flesh by God set free.

The Spirit came into the womb, of that young virgin at her word. And in that humble stable birth, she bore the master of the earth.

Within the temple of her breast, the word of God took human form. Inside of her unknown to man, the life of Jesus Christ began.

Shout praises to the Father blest, and to His Son, of whom we sing; and to the Holy Ghost we send the praise of ages without end. Amen.

It is regrettable that very little study has taken place on this interesting and treasured part of Vincentian life. A close look at some manuscript sources might help to clarify further the origins^r and intention of the Christmas Novena. Further information about the novena would be gratefully accepted by the present author.

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We cannot have peace with God, with our neighbor, and with ourselves unless Jesus Christ grant it to us.

St. Louise de Marillac

God governs all things with wisdom and love, and demands of us an entire and loving resignation to His guidance. It is indeed the great secret of the spiritual life to abandon to Him all that we love by abandoning ourselves wholly to His Will. He never destroys His work, but He perfects it.

St. Vincent de Paul