

How to Use *O COME EMMANUEL* in Your Choir or Parish as a Group Devotional

by Gordon Giles

During Advent, many choirs and musical groups are preparing hard for seasonal services, often focused on Christmas itself. A lot of work, preparation, and practice are involved. This can have two opposing consequences.

On the one hand, it can mean that we lose sight of what Christmas is really about: Just as shoppers sometimes forget, so too can singers, who are desperately trying to get the best out of themselves and others, in quite a short space of time! On the other hand, all that preparation means extra rehearsals and more time spent together. And while that time often has music as its focus, it can be a good time to share friendship and fellowship, and of course, to pray and praise God together. St. Benedict believed that work and prayer go hand in hand, and where worship-leading is a form of work, it is, of course, a form of prayer too. So as you prepare your Christmas worship, here are some suggestions about how you might use the material in this book for a few minutes each time you come together to prepare for the task of leading others at the great Christmas services.

If you have time as a group to meet on separate occasions to follow the “Group Material” with or without other musicians, then do refer to that material at the end of the book (pages 161-165)

If each member of the group can adopt a discipline of daily reading during Advent then there will be much to share with others. There are questions for each day for family use posted on the website (www.paracletepress.com), but when meeting *as a choir*, or *as a music group*, you might like to try these briefer activities:

Session One: During a practice session, read aloud *1 Thessalonians 5:4–11*, and then sing the Taizé chant “Wait for the Lord” at least a dozen times in succession. Don’t give up, or suppose it gets boring—it doesn’t, but rather grows and enters into you as you enter into the spirit of the singing. Be adventurous: If you can sing other harmonies, go ahead; be free in the spirit to go wherever your voice takes you. If you have musical instruments, do the same. United in the music, you can go your different ways, and this can be a revelation in many senses. Try it, and thank God. You might even want to introduce this into an Advent carol service! When you have done this, share your feelings about what you expected to happen, and about what did happen.

Session Two: On another occasion sing the hymn “Let all mortal flesh keep silence.” What sensations and emotions does it arouse in you? Read *Isaiah 6:1–6* and share your thoughts about the fear and the glory of God. Then read *Romans 8:18–25*. Does this change your views at all? Then sing “Earth was waiting, spent and restless.” Pray together for the coming of God’s Kingdom, the release of those in bondage to sin, terror, or injustice, and let all you sing today be imbued with a desire for justice and peace.

Session Three: As a group, or in twos or threes, share stories about your family history. What were your parents called? Who came before them? Share what you know (within limits!). Then construct for yourselves a “musical reading” of *Matthew 1:1–17*, interspersed with the verses of the hymn “Of the Father’s heart begotten.” For example, the first member of the group reads aloud, “Abraham was the father of Isaac,” and then the next person says,

“and Isaac the Father of Jacob,” and so on. Pause every seven or eight names to sing a verse of the hymn (someone will have to work this out beforehand!). How does this make you feel about your place in history? What does it tell you about God’s hand in history?

Session Four: As Christmas approaches, there may be particular carols that you are working on for a special service. Before rehearsing a carol, do a “Bible Study” on it. If it is in the book, there will be some material to help you. Find the biblical passage from which it draws its inspiration or text, look at the passage line by line, and come to grips with what it is saying. How is the meaning relevant, or different today? Do the same with the text of the carol—how does the poetry work? What is the poet actually telling us about God, about Jesus, and about ourselves? And then look at the music: Sing it to “la,” without the text. What is the music doing? Where does it rise and fall? Where is the climax of the piece (it might be the highest note)? Where does the music take us, and how does it bring us back home? Is the piece difficult or easy, and if so, why and how? Then look for ways in which the flow of the music enhances the meaning of the words. Finally, sing the piece through: It will be different! (Good examples from the book are to be found on December 7, 10, 12, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 29, 30, 31, and January 4.)

Session Five: Take a vote among yourselves—what is your favorite carol? And what is your least favorite carol? (You need two separate votes for this!) Be prepared to say why you like or dislike a particular carol, and share your views. Is there a consensus? Then consider whether your reasons are affected by musical, theological, personal, or textual considerations. Consider the carol that was voted most unpopular: Try to appreciate its merits, and sing it together. Have you changed your mind? If not, why not, and if so, why? Reward yourselves by singing the most popular carol in the vote, and ask your choir director why it is not included in the carol service!

Session Six: Christmas may be past now, but as you gather to move into the New Year, reflect on how your carol services went. Were they the same as last year, or was there something different, not only in what you did, but in how you and everyone else felt? Be kind about any mistakes anyone made. Thank God for the gift of music, the ability to share it, and for the worldwide fellowship that it provides. Give thanks for the wide variety of Christian music available to us, and perhaps make a point of learning something from a different tradition. You might like to try “The Candle Song,” or “The Advent Responsory” if either are unfamiliar. Give thanks to God for the delights of the Christmas season, and seek his help and guidance as you continue to grow together in musical fellowship and spiritual harmony.