

THE GREAT ANTHEM OF CHRISTMASTIDE

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THE Christmas Cycle extends from the first Sunday of Advent to the Feast of the Purification of Our Lady. It thus commemorates three outstanding facts in the history, not alone of the Church, but of the world. And in each of these three phases we perceive the beautiful presence of Our Lady either in prophecy or in person.

The first fact, signalized by the preparatory weeks of Advent, is the long period when the world awaited the coming of its Redeemer. This expectation was prophetically announced to the Serpent who had caused Adam's fall: "I will put enmities between thee and the Woman, and thy seed and her seed; she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel." Our Lady is thus presented to the expectant gaze of the world in its first morning of human habitation.

The second grand fact is the fulfillment of this prophecy. God came visibly amongst us, and Christmas is the great holiday of the world. Again do we look upon Mary, His blessed Mother. Not only do historians date all the occurrences of earth before or after this central fact of all history, but poets and painters have celebrated it in their various fashions in innumerable pictures.

The third fact is the Jewish legal complement of the Birth of Our Lord, namely His presentation in the temple and the purification of His Mother. The Mosaic law required this—and He Who had come "not to destroy the law, but to fulfill it," humbly allowed his sinless Mother to comply with every detail of the law. "Who made the law, the law obeys," sang one of our Latin poets.

Summary of Prophecy

In these three phases of history, then, we confront a summary of the prophecy, the fulfillment, the complement, of the Birth of Christ. And, with the perfection of propriety, we also confront the personality of Mary, Mother of the Lord, in all three.

It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that throughout this holy season, the Church should direct our attention to Mother as well as to Son, even as St. Matthew wondrously couples their names in his Gospel: "Mary, of whom was born Jesus, Who is called Christ." The Marian anthem for the whole of Christmas-tide is the exquisite Alma Redemptoris Mater, whose first three words ("Benedict Mother of the Redeemer") serve both to address her and to sum up in briefest manner her marvelous position in the scheme of our redemption.

The Divine Office of the first Sunday of Advent begins with verses of the previous Saturday, and then is heard the beautiful anthem:

"Mother benign of our redeeming Lord,
Star of the sea and portal of the skies,
Unto thy fallen people help afford—
Fallen, but striving still anew to rise.
"Thou who didst once, while wondrous worlds adored,
Bear thy Creator, Virgin then as now,
O by thy holy joy at Gabriel's word,
Pity the sinners who before thee bow."

This is the translation of the anthem by "the distinguished scholar, the Rt. Rev. Sir Oswald Hunter-Blair, O. S. B.," which I find in Dom Brett's elegant volume, "The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal." The anthem has also been rendered into English verse by Cardinal Newman, Archbishop Bagshawe, and Fathers Caswall and Wallace.

It is interesting to note that the original Latin contains only six lines of classical hexameter verse. This cannot be adequately represented in English metres, since these depend on "accent" rather than on "quantity" in the syllables. As we all know, attempts have been made, from time to time, to echo in some fashion the rhythmic swing of classical hexameters in the rougher medium of English verse. Thus we have Longfellow's delightful imitation in the opening of his "Evangeline"—to ourselves just now to a singer. An attempt like this in the English rendering has been given in the Marquess of Eglar's edition of the Roman

Breviary. The first line of this rendering is

"Maiden! Mother of Him Who redeems us, thou that abidest"

and we can appreciate the rhythmic echo like to that with which the "Evangeline" has familiarized us. From the eight lines of Dom Oswald, we have descended to six English hexameters. But a still greater reduction of space is found in Archbishop Bagshawe's six lines of English dactylic tetrameters:

"Our Saviour's sweet Mother, who art to us given
As Star of the Sea and bright portal of Heaven,
O help us to rise when we fall, for while earth
Stood wondering, thou didst to thy Maker give birth,
Yet wast ever Virgin, saluted with 'Hail'
By Gabriel; for us let thy mercy avail."

Another Fine Version

Could this space be still further reduced? The powers of compression, as well as of expansion, possessed by a master worker in verse, are illustrated in the fine version made by the poet-priest and convert, Father Caswall. His translation is also in six lines, but has a less number of syllables than any of the others:

"Mother of Christ! hear thou thy people's cry,
Star of the deep, and Portal of the sky!
Mother of Him who thee from nothing made,
Sinking we strive, and call to thee for aid;
Oh, by that joy which Gabriel brought to thee,
Pure Virgin, first and last, look on our misery."

It is perhaps curious to note, in this connection, that Caswall's version antedated all the others referred to here. But what lover of Our Lady, having "a turn for verse", should be blamed for essaying such a beautiful task, albeit others had already succeeded so well?

While the Latin verses thus translated are sung in the Divine Office throughout Christmastide, the versicle, response, and prayer that follow vary. Down to the First Vespers of the Nativity (recited on the Eve of Christmas), these are (V—Versicle; R—Response; O—Oratorio—Prayer):

V.—The Angel of the Lord declared unto Mary.
R.—And she conceived of the Holy Ghost.

O—Pour forth, we beseech Thee, O Lord, thy grace into our hearts; that as we have known the Incarnation of Christ Thy Son by the message of an Angel, so, by His Passion and Cross, we may be brought to the glory of His resurrection; through the same Christ our Lord.—Amen.

Since Christmas celebrates the Birth of Christ, the versicle, response and prayer change when the anthem is sung at the close of the Divine Office for the First Vespers of the Feast (recited, as already pointed out, on Christmas Eve). Thenceforward, to the Feast of the Purification, we find:

V.—After child-birth thou didst remain a pure virgin.
R.—O Mother of God, intercede for us.

O—O God, who, by the fruitful virginity of Blessed Mary, hast given unto mankind the rewards of eternal glory; grant, we beseech Thee, that we may feel that she has been made worthy to receive the Author of life, our Lord Jesus Christ, Thy Son.—Amen.

Who composed the Latin hexameters of our anthem? They are credited to Hermannus Contractus—Hermann "the Cripple"—who was a felicitous poet as well as a chronicler and mathematician. Read the brief account of him given in "The Catholic Encyclopedia"; and if your leisure and interest will suggest further explorations, read the twenty large pages allotted in Duffield's work, "The Latin Hymn-Writers and Their Hymns," to "one of the most meritorious men of the eleventh century" (d. 1054). Duffield was a Presbyterian minister, but handles his theme sympathetically.

Popular Throughout Europe
The anthem became very popular throughout Europe. It is recommended for frequent use in the "Ancient Rite" (dating about the year 1200). Chaucer bases his "Prioresse's Tale" on a legend connected with its recitation by the "Litel Clergeon":

This litel child his litel book larned,
As he sat in the scole at his pryncer.
He Alma redemptoris herde singe,
As children lerned hir antiphon;
And, as he dorste, he drogh him mer and new.



Venite Adoremus

And hearkned ay the wordes and the note,
Till he the firste vers coude al by rote.

The little clerk was greatly attracted by both the words and the melody of our anthem. He listened to the singers with intense interest, until he knew by heart the first verse: "Alma redemptoris mater, quae pervia coeli." He filled his childish leisure singing it over and over again. Some strange sweetness it attracted him, for the "litel clergeon" was only seven years old. His mother had already taught him the Ave Maria, which the boy was accustomed to repeat twice daily, going to and from school. He loved Our Lady; and when an older companion explained the meaning of the Latin words, the boy was deeply impressed:

"And is this song maked in reverence
Of Cristes moder?" seyde the innocent;
"Now certes, I wol do my diligence
To conne it all, ere Cristemasse is went."

Sang On Way to School
He would learn the lovely chant of Christmastide "ere Cristemasse is went." He sang the hymn, as he had said the Ave Maria, going to and from school:

Ful merly than wolde he singe,
and crye
"O Alma redemptoris" ever-mo;
The swetes hath his herte pierced so
Of Cristes moder, that to hir to praye,
Ne can not stinte of singing by the weye.

His way led through the Jewish quarter of the town, and the hymn of praise to "Cristes moder" grew more and more unpleasant to the ears of the denizens. They hired a man to cut the boy's throat and thus assure the ceasing of the song. The body was thrown into a foul pit. Searchers for the lost one, at length coming to the Jewish quarter of the town, heard the sweet chant of the Alma Redemptoris Mater, and were amazed to find it coming from the lips of the boy hidden in the pit. They brought him to the church on a litter. There he was asked to explain the miraculous singing. He replied that our Lady had placed a grain on his tongue whilst he was dying, and he was thus enabled to continue the song of praise he so greatly loved. The grain was then removed, and the boy-martyr at length slept in the peace of the Lord.

In various forms, the legend spread over Europe, and its literature is not slight. In his admirable "Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln", Father Thurston discusses the excesses perpetrated on the Jews as a result partly of false rumors, partly of cupidity for their possessions, and he praises the manly stand of the Church authorities in their behalf. In an Appendix (pages 609, 610) he gives a further discussion of the subject.

Great Year of Church That Began And Ended on Eve of Christmas

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but closed it on December 24 of that same year.

Beyond these changes of date the sacred time set aside by the Church for the ampliest effusion of her gifts has always extended from one Christmas Eve to that following.

Opening Doorway to Peace

When, a year ago, Pius XI with three vigorous blows with a golden hammer broke away the little marble cross imbedded in the wall that closed the empty space of the Holy Door of St. Peter in Vatican and chanted: "Open to me the door of justice! Open the door for the Lord is with us!" he really opened the way for a whole year to innumerable souls who would cross that sacred threshold in search of divine gifts.

Those souls gathered around the Cradle of Jesus and from it proceeded on the path of purification. Many of them will find themselves once more around the Cradle of the Lord, purified and sanctified, when the Pope performs the closing symbolic rite.

He moves towards the Holy Door chanting the Biblical prophecy: "Thou shalt go out with joy, thou shalt be guided with gladness, because the mountains and hills will exult in seeing thy joy." He then chants the liturgical verses: "The stone which the builders rejected, the same is become the head of the corner." And the thoughts of those present are carried to the silence and poverty of Bethlehem where, ignored and despised by the proud of the earth, lay the Son of God who is the base of that new edifice of grace that the Lord has constructed in Holy Year. The Pope then blesses the bricks and cement, sprinkles them with holy water and incenses them.

Pope Lays First Bricks

Then, putting on an apron, he kneels before the Door and with the golden trowel, that was given him at the beginning of the year by the Catholic episcopate, dips into the cement three times and placing the portions on the threshold says:

"In faith and by virtue of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, who to the Prince of the

Apostles said: 'Thou art Peter and on this rock I shall build my Church.'

... He leaves the formula suspended for a moment and takes three gilded bricks placing them on the cement, the first in the center, the second on the right and the third on the left. Meanwhile he completes the formula: "... We place this principal stone to close the Holy Door to be reopened in every year of Jubilee."

And blessing the work with the sign of the Cross he rises and returns to the throne and washes his hands, while the choir sings the liturgical hymn of the dedication of the Church, in which is described the superb edifice of the Heavenly Jerusalem. Meanwhile the Cardinal Chief Penitentiary places on the cement bed another two bricks, one on each side of those just placed by the Pope, and then the Penitentiaries of the Vatican Basilica, assisted by workmen, follow and construct a part of the wall, until a screen is placed before it, closing the whole opening of the door and representing what will be the completed wall blocking the entire opening when later the workmen shall complete their task.

Then the Pope rises and from the throne invokes, with liturgical verses and prayers, the salvation and protection of God on His people, asking that through the mercy and goodness of the Almighty the sanctification of that place shall remain inviolate and that the family of the faithful shall rejoice in having obtained during the year the benefits of divine grace. And with the chanting of the *Te Deum* and the Papal blessing the solemn rite is ended.

Thoughts Turn to Bethlehem

While these things are taking place, the minds of Christians cannot but turn again and again to the solemnity of the day of the Birth of Our Lord. That stone placed at the closing of the Holy Door in the name of Jesus, Son of the Living God, recalls that Son of God who was born in the humility of the grotto of Bethlehem; that salvation of God invoked by the Pope on his people is the salvation that Jesus brought to all in the day of His poor and humble birth; the inviolate sanctification of the Jubilee Door besought by the Pope recalls the inviolate seal of sanctity that the Eternal Word, made flesh in the Cradle of Bethlehem, has brought to humanity.

Missions in Land Where the Infant Savior Was Born

By DR. ALEXANDER MOMBELLI
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JERUSALEM, Dec. 1.—Spreading the message of Christ in the land where the Divine Infant was born is an undertaking which may well arrest the attention of all Christians. That it has appealed to the imagination and quickened the interest of Catholics from every nation, is evident to all who have made the Holy Year pilgrimage to Rome and watched the groups that linger around the small section of the Missionary Exhibition reserved for the missions in Palestine.

The particular missions developed by the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem since its reestablishment 78 years ago, comprise 22 in Palestine and 11 in Transjordan. A booklet, recently compiled and studied by many who have attended the great Missionary Exhibition at Rome, tells of their origin; their development and their needs.

Reestablishment Of Patriarchate

The religious history of Jerusalem which is closely allied with that of the whole of Palestine, has followed in great measure the political fortunes of the country. The Sea of Jerusalem, first capital of nascent Christianity and open always to the invasion of foreign armies, after having seen its first pastor, St. James the Less, thrown from the Temple by the Hebrews, followed in the first ages of the Christian era alternate vicissitudes of prosperity and religious persecution until with the occupation of Palestine through the action of Mussulmans it became simply a titular See in *partibus infidelium*.

In the year 1847, however, Pope Pius IX decided to reestablish a regular Latin diocese having a titular resident in the place. In this act, providential for the interests of the Church in the Holy Land, the Pope was guided by various practical considerations. First among these was the need that the increased number of the faithful of the Latin Rite should be governed by their own Ordinary. Also there was need that there should be at Jerusalem a representative of Patriarchal dignity who in face of the numerous schismatic sects could maintain and consolidate the prestige of the Roman Church.

Once reestablished, the Patriarchate saw at once the necessity of creating in the Holy Land new centers of Catholic propaganda for the conversion of Mohammedans and Schismatics and so there began the work of the Patriarchal Missions in Palestine and Transjordan. The scarcity of clergy, the paucity of means, the religious fanaticism of the followers of Mohammed, the ignorance and evil manner of life of the mass of the population, rendered very difficult the work of the missionaries of the Patriarchate, who had to endure hardships of every kind and some of whom had to face death on the field of apostolic labor.

The World War brought most serious drawbacks to nearly all the patriarchal missions. The work has been begun again with renewed energy. The thirty-three missions of the Patriarchate are scattered over Palestine and Transjordan from Ramallah, a few miles from Jerusalem, to Gaffa of Galilee, in the confines of Nazareth, and from Salt, a little over the Jordan, to Madaba and Karak in the desert of the Beduins. The work of the Missions is entrusted to the clergy of the Patriarchate who are prepared for the most part in the diocesan Seminary of Beit-Gala, which has already given to Palestine more than two hundred priests. The Institute embraces the academic, philosophic and theological courses and is international in character, amongst the students being native Arabs and youths from European countries. From the year 1921 its direction has been in the hands of the German Benedictines of Beuron.

As an auxiliary force to the work of the priests there are the Sisters of the Rosary, a native Congregation established some fifty years ago which has been productive of much fruit among the female population especially among the Beduins, where, without the assistance of the Sisters little progress could be made.

Attention Given to Schools

A patriarchal mission begins by the attempt to open at least a school for boys and one for girls to which is often attached an assembly room. The Congregation of Christian Mothers and also that of the Children of Mary are likewise established. Clubs for the young and groups of Boy Scouts are also formed when possible.

Besides the regular expenses for the maintenance of those parochial works and of the persons directing or attached to them in many missions, there remains the problem of the erection of a church, or at least of a chapel for divine service, of a presbytery for the priests and of a convent for the Sisters, besides the School. The extreme poverty of the population does not permit the parishes to provide these at their own expense. For these needs the Patriarchate can only count on the Providence of God and His human means, which are the aims of the good people of America and Europe. The conversions which are effected every year in Palestine and in Transjordan are proofs that the missionary labors of the Latin Patriarchate are blessed by the Lord.