

## BLACKFRIARS

### THE HUMBLE SINGER OF EMMANUEL

THE Eucharistic hymns of St. Thomas are a cycle—indeed the only cycle—of liturgical song. They form such a unity and fulness of Eucharistic truth and worship that a greater than Elgar or Bach would be needed to express them as an oratorio.

But there is one spiritual quality throughout them which the greatest master of music would confess to be beyond the power of his craft. Every line of these Eucharistic hymns, though unmistakably wrought by genius, is yet dyed by a subtle rosential humility which has escaped notice only by the semblance of a miracle. Yet if none but the prayer of the humble pierces the clouds, this twice-hidden humility of the Eucharistic hymns has given them a place apart in the great throng and song of liturgical prayer.

Let us draw attention to this quality (1) in the Hymns of the Divine Office and (2) in the Sequence of the Mass.

#### (1)

The first scholarly instinct of the writer of these Eucharistic hymns is to realize the persons and times for which they were meant. They are meant to be sung or said at Vespers, Matins, Lauds, by a choir of clerics. Most dutifully does St. Thomas bear that in memory and in mind.

At the evening office of Vespers how simply does the Pange Lingua become

In supremae nocte coenae  
Recumbens cum fratribus.

\* \* \* \*

At Matins, the morning office, which will be so soon followed by the morning sacrifice, there is the unique explicit reference to the Holy Eucharist as a sacrifice:

Sic sacrificium istud instituit  
Cujus officium committi voluit  
Solis presbyteris.

The hymn even succeeds in alluding almost lyrically to the now nearing day-break:

THE HUMBLE SINGER OF EMMANUEL

. . . duc nos quo tendimus  
Ad *lucem* quam inhabitas.

\* \* \* \*

The Verbum Supernum for Lauds is a recapitulation of the two hymns Pange Lingua and Sacris Solemniis. There is a full lyrical note in the poet's reference to the dawn which has now opened up the splendid universe of sight:

O salutaris hostia  
Quae coeli pandis ostium.

\* \* \* \*

But the most engaging, if hidden, quality of these hymns is their humility. The writer of them never presumes to be the emotional mouthpiece of the throng of singers whom Mother Church will command to their singing. For these official and formal prayers of the Church Militant, the only emotions allowed to function are, if I may dare so name them, the official and impersonal emotions of the Church's choristers. Hence, as the hymn-writer's personal emotions are sternly suppressed, nowhere in these hymns is the first personal singular to be found. Even the first personal plural "WE" is used but five times in the three hymns. Only once in the closing strophe of the Sacris Solemniis does the Church's obedient hymn-writer allow the second person singular!

\* \* \* \*

Yet, of course, nothing is lost to the liturgy by this stern asceticism of the personal, since the official emotions of the liturgy are given an official and worthy expression. Few doxologies surpass the three which close these Eucharistic hymns. Their recognized liturgical fitness—a rare quality!—has given two of them an official place in the ritual of Eucharistic intercession.

But it is not always realized how explicitly St. Thomas has used the prayer of "wonder" in this "Sacramentum mirabile" (wonderful Sacrament). Thus in the Pange Lingua he writes:

*Tantum* ergo Sacramentum  
Veneremur cernui.

BLACKFRIARS

Here the implicit exclamation *Tantum* (so great!) expresses the mind's wonder.

The Verbum Supernum ends with an explicit exclamation:

O salutaris hostia.

But the Sacris Solemniis ends with explicit wonder:

O res mirabilis! manducat Dominum  
Pauper, servus, et humilis.

(2)

The *Lauda Sion* is a perfect example of the Saint's humble scholarship; which in matters of faith led him always to believe what he was told, and in matters of obedience led him always to do what he was told. Clearly the command to write a Sequence was different from the command to write a Breviary hymn.

Let us approach this command to write a Sequence along St. Thomas's own way of approach. We shall find it in the *Summa Theologica*.<sup>1</sup> The Doctor Eucharisticus explains how fitting are all the words used by Holy Mother Church in the Sacrifice of the Mass: "Since the whole mystery of our salvation is comprised in this sacrament, therefore it is performed with greater solemnity than the other sacraments. . . . Therefore the celebration of this mystery is preceded by a certain PREPARATION.

". . . There precedes in the second place, the INSTRUCTION OF THE PEOPLE . . . when the Lectors and Subdeacons read aloud in the church the teachings of the prophets and the apostles."<sup>2</sup>

The scholarly mind of St. Thomas saw that a Sequence was essentially a part of that Instruction of the People which was to prepare them for the due celebration of the great mystery of Holy Mass.

Let the reader now read the *Lauda Sion* once more. He will at once hear and see a priest of Holy Church instructing simple people. He cannot help noting the prevalence of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Part III, Q. 83, Art. 4.

<sup>2</sup> I.e., the Lessons and the Epistles.

THE HUMBLE SINGER OF EMMANUEL

second person singular in the verbs. "*Lauda, Sion. Quantum potes, tantum aude.*"

One exception there is, but it is needed by the action:

Panem verum in salutis  
*Consecramus* hostiam.

It is not the people but the priest who consecrates the redeeming sacrifice.

In this instruction of the people the priest had his face to the people and his back to the altar.

But when he has sufficiently instructed the people he turns his face, as theirs is already turned, to the ONE before whom priest and people alike are sinners. Jesus is the Shepherd whose flock is this people with their priest. As in the *Panis Angelicus* and *O Salutaris*, a faint lyrical undertone of indescribable literary perfection steals into the Saint's words:

Bone Pastor! Panis vere!  
Jesu nostri miserere.

At once the second person singular breaks into the first person plural—"Thou" into "we"—as priest and people become one flock of dutiful sheep ready to be led and fed by their divine Shepherd.

\* \* \* \*

We have pointed out how the writer of these Eucharistic hymns was of such humble scholarship that he did not dare to colour the official hymns of the Liturgy with any individual emotions of his own soul. He rightly thought his difficult task was done when he had expressed such official emotion as adoration, wonder, praise, thanks. The individual expression of the official emotions, he humbly left to the individual.

This delicacy of a saint's conscience was especially active in never allowing him to put into the mouth of his fellow-choristers a profession of individual sin. We can call it only a certain scrupulousness of humility which made it impossible for him to write either—

Quis est homo qui non fleret  
Matrem Christi si videret  
In tanto supplicio.

## BLACKFRIARS

or especially

Ingemisco tamquam reus;  
Culpa rubet vultus meus.

Only once did he near the brink of this personal profession of sin. But his sternly rationed humility let him say no more than—

. . . manducat Dominum  
Pauper, servus et humilis.

\* \* \* \*

But in one hymn, *ORO TE DEVOTE*,<sup>3</sup> this lover and singer of the *LATENS DEITAS* unlocked his own hidden heart. The writer of the *Pange Lingua* and the *Lauda Sion* is no longer a poet-theologian commanded to compose official liturgical hymns for his brothers, the official choristers and ministers of the Church. He is, as he sings—or sobs?—a poor sinner withdrawn from his fellow-choristers, and in the darkness and silence of the night pleading with his twice-hidden Redeemer. From first to last his deep emotions of love and sorrow have full sovereignty over his verse. He sings and sings again of “Thou” and “I.” But the “I” who sings is a sinner; and the “Thou” for whose ears alone his song takes flight is this sinner’s one hope. In the hymns he had written for others to sing, though he had spoken of Jesus as the Sacrifice for sin, his kindly courteousness had kept him from asking them to join with him—a sinner—in a confession of sin.

But now he is alone with God Alone—no one but His Hidden God sees him—no one but his “My God” hears him, as he calls himself a repentant thief beseeching mercy—yea, an unclean leper begging for but one drop of that blood which could cleanse a world from sin.

VINCENT McNABB, O.P.

---

<sup>3</sup> Theology and Prosody had always demanded *ORO* instead of *ADORO*. It is a consolation that in these latter days the documents have justified the demands of Theology and Prosody. Yet the argument against the authenticity of the hymn from the silence of the documents is at least inconclusive. Of the writer of this incomparable lyric all that can be said is: *Aut angelicus aut angelus*.