

THE HYMNS THEY DESERVE

(PART II)

THE Middle Ages will provide a wealth of hymnody, most of which lies unhappily neglected upon the library shelves. The output was prodigious, and was of varying quality. The most outstanding literary form is the *Sequence*, which found its way into the Mass and was sung immediately before the Gospel. Its originator was a Benedictine monk, Notker Balbulus, the Stammerer or perhaps the Garrulous—he has left most entertaining gossip of his hero Charlemagne. He found it hard, we are told, to commit to memory the long melodies sung on the last syllable of the *Alleluia* and to counteract this failing he forestalled Mr. Pelman by setting the notes to a simple form of words. In the next three centuries this elementary device evolved into a definite literary form, written finally in metre and rhyme. The Easter Sequence, *Victimae Paschali laudes*, shows it in its earlier stages and the Whit Sunday Sequence, *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, shows it fully developed as a recognized form of rhymed composition.

Before dealing with the Sequence, however, we must refer to a series of hymns more familiar in their English than in their Latin form. The original from which they have been quarried is the 12th century production of Bernard of Morlas, a monk of Cluny: *Hora novissima, tempora pessima sunt, vigilemus*: "The world is very evil, the times are waxing late; Be sober and keep vigil, the Judge is at the gate." It is for the most part a long denunciation of an evil world fast moving towards the abyss of destruction. In it he attacks vice with a savage candour that lacks both restraint and reticence. But from this majestic diatribe are drawn those well-known Anglican hymns: "Brief life is here our portion" and "Jerusalem the golden." The latter is, in its Latin form, the most lyrical cry ever uttered by the

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mediæval Christian pilgrim in his longing for the City of God:

Urbs Syon aurea, patria lactea, cive decora,
omne cor obruis, omnibus obstruis et cor et ora.
nescio, nescio, quae jubilatio, lux tibi qualis,
quam socialia gaudia, gloria quam specialis.
pax ibi florida, pascua vivida, viva medulla;
nulla molestia, nulla tragoedia, lacrima nulla.
o sacra potio, sacra refectio, pax animarum;
o pius, o bonus, o placidus sonus, hymnus earum.

From the lips of Abelard, whose tragic life-story is familiar to those who have read Helen Waddell's great novel, *Peter Abelard*, comes a Saturday Vesper hymn written to celebrate the joys of the endless Sabbath which knows no evening:

O quanta qualia sunt illa sabbata
quae semper celebrat superna curia,
Quae fessis requies, quae merces fortibus,
cum erit omnia Deus in omnibus.
O what their joy and their glory must be,
Those endless Sabbaths the Blessed Ones see.
Crown for the valiant; to weary ones rest;
God shall be all, and in all ever blest.

But to return to the *Sequence*, this hymn form is brought to perfection by the monks of the Abbey of St. Victor at Paris in the 12th century, amongst whom was Adam of St. Victor, the greatest composer of mediæval sequences and St. Thomas's model for both metrical form and melody in the *Lauda Sion*. But St. Thomas himself is supreme in the Middle Ages not only as a theologian, but also as author of the most perfect Eucharistic hymns that have ever been written. The character of his genius has a marked similarity both in his theology and in his hymns. In neither was he isolated from an existing tradition within which his genius is framed. His work comes to crown centuries of uninterrupted human effort, and must be regarded as part of a living process of historical development. This is especially true of his Eucharistic hymns: they are built up on what has gone before and they contain virtually the whole past history of the Christian hymn. The *Lauda Sion* in its

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metrical form and its method of treatment, e.g., its use of Old Testament figures, belongs to the Victorine School: in fact its prototype for metre and tune is Adam of St. Victor's Easter Sequence *Zyma vetus expurgetur*. In its contents it transcends the work of any other writer, following quite exactly his teaching on the Blessed Sacrament in the *Tertia Pars* of his *Summa*. It is the supreme dogmatic poem; it never wanders from the correct terminology; its thought is hard and closely woven; and from start to finish it is a poem, with an austerity and grandeur which no Latin poet of the Middle Ages ever equalled. The *Pange lingua* which recalls the first line of Venantius' great hymn, its model for metre and form, has all the technical excellence of rhyme and metre reached by Adam of St. Victor, and its last two stanzas we sing at Benediction, the familiar *Tantum ergo*. The *Verbum supernum prodiens* borrows its first line from the well-known Ambrosian hymn for Advent. Many consider its finest stanza the one which precedes the *O Salutaris Hostia*:

se nascens dedit socium	In birth man's fellow-man was he,
convescens in edulium	His meat while sitting at the
se moriens in pretium	board;
se regnans dat in praemium.	He died, his ransom to be,
	He reigns to be his great reward.

The *Sacris sollemniis* shows an outstanding technical skill in handling a fourteen syllabled metre. The doctrinal note is less marked: the image is more human, and Our Lord appears like the Jesus in Leonardo's fresco as one taking leave of his friends.

Franciscan piety brings the last flowering of Latin hymnody in the *Dies Irae*, with its terror of Judgment tempered by the lovely appeal to Our Lord as the Saviour of fallen man.

Quaerens me sedisti lassus	Faint and weary Thou hast sought
	me,
redemisti, crucem passus	On the Cross of suffering bought
	me;
tantus labor non sit cassus?	Shall such grace be vainly brought
	me?

The *Stabat Mater* likewise sprang from Franciscan devotion

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to the passion of Our Lady, its author almost certainly being Jacopone da Todi, a true son of St. Francis in his poverty, his joyous songs and his love of Christ. Most of his songs were sung in his own native Italian.

Latin has run its course, and languages of Modern Europe are shaped and ready for literary expression. Poetic inspiration passes from the Church and the Cloister into the world at large, and issues from the lips of Dante, and the many singers who find their stimulus in the New Learning. Christian piety too finds readier utterance in the language of the people. In England we have only to think of Richard Rolle and the writers of the Mystery Plays to realize what a hold the vernacular had obtained by the fifteenth century. For some time the popular hymn did not spring into prominence in its native dress. It needed the impetus of the religious revolution which rent Christendom in the 16th century.

Two points need to be mentioned in connection with the Reformation. (1) The introduction of the vernacular—the language of the people—for official worship, which was to be the feature of all the dissident bodies: (2) the use of the vernacular hymn as a rallying cry and a vehicle of propaganda.

In regard to the first point, the Church adhered to her unbroken tradition and kept Latin as her liturgical and official language. Its use emphasized her unity of doctrine, worship and tradition, at a time when such a challenge, reactionary as it may seem to some, had to be put before men who were breaking down tradition after tradition of their fathers, often the good as well as the bad, without counting the full price of schism to be paid by their children. External unity is a vital factor in the life of the Church, and in the West her tenacious hold of Latin stands as its symbol and its guarantee.

The traditional lines of worship, with a considerable purging of mediæval accretions, left no room for the vernacular hymn as an essential feature in her liturgy. The laity assist by precept at Sunday Mass and are left free to attend Divine Office, wherever they may find it being celebrated

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as public worship. Practically it means that most lay people are cut off from the Church's Liturgical Offices. The Church has preserved the principle of public worship but at the expense of excluding the vast majority of its members from active participation. Such devotions as have been developed for the laity rest largely upon local conventions, current fashions and the dictates of sentiment. Provided they are in conformity with the Faith, the Devotions used by the different parishes may range over a wide and bewildering variety of practice. These are largely shaped by the character of each local congregation: a Catholic at Dockhead might possibly find the Sunday evening service, apart from Benediction, at the London Oratory not altogether to his taste. Vernacular devotions have no official part in the liturgical life of the Church, and in that respect they are nobody's children. This must be kept in mind when discussing the use we make of vernacular hymns. These played no decisive part in shaping the life of the Church in the last four centuries for they have no place in her official worship. For us, this deals with second point. Outside the Church however, the vernacular hymn has played a leading part as an integral element of public worship, a vehicle of teaching and a rallying cry. Luther in Germany was quick to realize the value of the native hymn. He translated and composed hymns of such fine character that they have given Lutheranism a peculiar strength and vitality of tradition found in no other non-Catholic body. Heine rightly described "Ein Feste Burg" as the *Marseillaise* of the Luteran Reformation. The Calvinistic elements of Protestantism built their corporate worship upon metrical versions of the Psalms, most of which took from Geneva their metre and their melodies. In Scotland, the words and music of these paraphrases are remarkable for a great sobriety and dignity.

Anglicanism had few hymns to begin with. The traditional office Hymns, apart from the Psalms and Canticles, were excluded from the official forms of common prayer. Isaac Watts and the Wesleys were among the first to compose the hymns which are a familiar feature both of Methodism and

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of the Church of England to-day. The other predominant influences in Anglicanism were the Evangelical Revival and the Oxford Movement, each of which, like Methodism, used the hymn as a method of teaching and as a stimulus to *esprit de corps*. The Anglican Office is sufficiently adaptable to incorporate hymns into its morning and evening offices, without inconvenience, so that for the last two generations the hymn has become an indispensable feature of official worship. The leaders of the Oxford Movement, with their insistence upon the Apostolic character of the Anglican Church, gleaned freely from the Missals, Breviaries and Antiphonals of the Mediæval English Uses, and translated the hymns they found there into sound versions with the metre of the originals, so that they could be sung to their own melodies or adapted to new ones. In the English Hymnal, the best general collection of English hymns, one hundred and sixty-one are translated from the Latin: they include the bulk of the Office Hymns in the Roman Breviary, the Sequences in the Missal, as well as other splendid examples which had disappeared from use for four centuries. A great many of these ancient hymns are sung with enjoyment and vigour by ordinary people, who are perhaps disposed to appreciate their quality by familiar and lifelong association with the sonorous beauty of the English Psalms, Collects and Scriptures. Their ears are attuned to the cadences of some of the finest English ever spoken or sung. In such circumstances it ought to be difficult to tolerate shoddy meretricious hymns for very long, although some of the most notorious offenders seem to enjoy a hardy old age, to judge from some of the Radio Services. Some of them have nothing to redeem them, not even the sturdy vulgarity that characterizes those that may be heard within the walls of our Catholic churches. They are damned not so much by their mawkishness as their portentous Victorian "refinement"! However it is no business of ours to throw stones: it is just possible that our own hymn-singing proclivities are permanently held in a kind of Crystal Palace!

We have already seen that the vernacular hymn in Catholic worship has not had those opportunities to develop

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a firm tradition which circumstances have given it elsewhere. The literary traditions of our public worship are purely Latin and unless we are educated in and for it we can hardly be said to have a living understanding of it: objectively we belong to it, but our personal sense of its power to stimulate our devotion is, to express it gently, dormant. The treasury of Patristic and Mediæval Hymnody, for example, is closed to practically all except the clergy, and even from them it does not always evoke a very solid *pietas*. The Psalter, which is the traditional book of Christian devotion—all those bound to the Office have the privilege of reciting it every week—is a closed book to most Catholics. There is little or no opportunity to recite them in the vernacular for public worship, and even if they are so used, the translation is—well—a little difficult to fit to music!

Our vernacular hymns, a recent growth within the Catholic body, do seem to suffer from certain material handicaps. They have to be fitted in somewhere where they do not interfere with the Mass or the Office. They are generally used to fill up gaps and bridge awkward pauses in that heterogeneous collection of devotions we call the evening service. They are few in number compared with the Anglican hymns, and of those only about ten per cent. are sung at all. The criterion of their popularity is difficult to estimate: it seems to depend partly on a resolute conservatism which rejects all but those learnt in childhood: these few are sung without much regard to their teaching, their poetic value, their musical quality or their devotional stimulus. They are just a habit! Rather like sitting in the same pew in church! The presence of a stranger in our pew or on our hymn board produces the same feeling of mild outrage. We are members of a living tradition that has produced the finest hymns man has ever written. Granting translations of fine quality would such hymns ever be sung by the ordinary Catholic congregation to-day? There is no tradition for the good hymn of this character being regularly sung in our churches. Of the two hundred and fifty English hymns in the *Westminster Hymnal* ninety-seven are translations from the Latin Office hymns, but to the best of my

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knowledge the number of these actually sung in our Parish Churches is negligible. Many of these translations are fair and singable, though generally speaking we are bound to admit that they do not reach the high standard of the *English Hymnal*. It is significant that not a single one of them is in the Sapphic metre.

Of the other hymns some are capable of standing up to hard use and provide a good devotional stimulus. There are others which a Catholic would hardly exhibit to a non-Catholic friend as shining examples of songs of praise addressed to Almighty God or to His Saints by the faithful who have counted in their number St. Ambrose, Prudentius, or St. Thomas Aquinas. It is a good test to take a hymn-book out of its ordinary surroundings and to read its contents aloud as poetry; if the hymn is good it will stand the test. As we have given examples of ancient hymns, we may perhaps be permitted to cull one or two blooms from modern sources. In *The Catholic Youth's Hymnbook* (No. 101) we have this tribute to St. Patrick:

Hibernia's champion Saint all hail!
With fadeless glory crowned
The offspring of your ardent zeal
This day your praise shall sound,
Wandering through Error's gloomy night
Our sires did lose their way.
None cheered their hearts with heavenly light,
With Truth's consoling ray.

From *The Crown of Jesus* (No. 156)

PERSECUTION

(*To be sung joyfully*)

Now is the time to leap for joy
To shout and be exceeding glad,
While enemies their arts employ
And friends pronounce us fools or mad.

If we followed out the letter and did leap, etc., our friends might have good reason for their pronouncement. *The Westminster Hymnal* provides several interesting specimens:

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- No. 25. Earth hears and to its base
Rocks wildly to and fro;
Tombs burst, seas, rivers, mountains quake;
The veil is rent in two.

Again No. 122, the doggerel of which seems to be a just judgment on its author who, after his conversion, put his copy of Shelley on the fire:

Oh! balmy and bright as a moonlight night
Is the love of our Blessed Mother;
It lies like a beam
Over life's cold stream,
And life knows not such another.

- No. 35. Scorpions ceased; the slimy serpent
Laid his deadly poison by.
Savage beasts of cruel instinct
Lost their wild ferocity.

These are typical, perhaps not even the worst, and they need no comment.

There is only one standard by which all hymns are to be judged, and that is the highest of all. They must be related to their final cause—God-to-be-praised. That means that only the best man can offer of his literary and musical achievements will begin to approach that standard. The old hymns, like the Psalms, are theocentric; the modern hymn tends to be autocentric, begins and ends with a sense of self-satisfaction and overlooks its real purpose. Poetry and melody must achieve a unity of self-forgetting praise of God if the hymn is to conform to its true object. Where there is a developed taste for liturgical worship there is a sense of the *numinous* which fills the minds with awe and wonder before the majesty of God, and is a sure protective against using in our songs of worship words or music that are unsuited to or unworthy of their infinite purpose. The Latin Liturgy sets a standard that no vernacular devotion can surpass. Amongst its greatest treasures are its hymns, redeemed man's finest poems and melodies wedded into the indissoluble union of the Christian Song of Praise.

Our standards in hymn-singing seem to bear little relation to the Liturgy. They depend upon other factors: education, cultivation, our taste for music and letters naturally

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help to form our criterion when we are faced with a hymn. The hymn is a song just like any other: and if we find our supreme musical pleasure in drawing room ditties like "The Little Grey Home in the West" or "Roses in Picardy," we shall almost inevitably prefer the hymn that conveys the same kind of sentiments in the same kind of fashion. If we know next to nothing of poetry, we shall be prepared to tolerate almost any doggerel that comes our way in church. In fact for the generality of Catholics set right in the thick of modern industrial conditions, which make it uncommonly difficult to form human cultivated tastes and find an active recreation in creative pursuits, it is hard to see when we shall begin to form any taste whatever for really good hymns such as we possess in the Church's Liturgical Offices. The same holds good for the tunes, especially those that are in the Modes of Plainsong. Here and there a little can be done in Catholic Schools, but that is only a piecemeal remedy. The solution is admittedly hard to find. Perhaps the line of approach is through Liturgical Education and Catholic Instruction on the lines of Liturgical Prayer with its insistence upon the organic view and the corporate sense of Christianity. It involves reforms of a nature which it is hard to see as practical possibilities under the present system, since it touches not the particular classroom or department, but the whole syllabus, the whole school, the whole system.

Meantime we go on getting the hymns we deserve, but does the Almighty?

AELWIN TINDAL-ATKINSON, O.P.