

THE HYMNS THEY DESERVE¹

PART I

HYMNS have been written by the thousand, and of the thousands written very few have stood the test of time, the vicissitudes of religious revolution, or the vagaries of human taste. Few of us can regret the disappearance of many hymns that would evoke upon discovery no response in our minds beyond a polite curiosity and mild amusement that we reserve for the more grotesque museum pieces. Modern hymns, however, may meet with a different reception, and the man who would open a public discussion about them must step out along a thorny path, where even his guardian angel may fear to tread. Some hymns which the stream of time has borne down to us may still be sung with pleasure, "rari nantes in gurgite vasto." And their appeal need not rest solely upon their antiquity, but may possibly be based upon their adequate expression of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.

We may like hymns or we may dislike them, whether on principle or from prejudice: we may sing them one and all with a joyous abandon, indifferent alike to their quality or their quantity: we may accept them with a Christian resignation as part of that bracing discipline, which makes a man upon other occasions take medicine with a nauseous taste hoping that thereby he may possibly reap some benefit. Whatever we may think or feel about them, hymns are here and we cannot avoid them: a careless turn of the knob on the Radio will bring us the most unexpected examples: on Sunday the very streets are not free of them, when every town has its contingent of the Salvation Army: even attendance at a Cup Final may involve us willy-nilly in a mass of rough men sobbing in chorus, "Abide with me, Fast falls the eventide!"

¹ Substance of a paper read at a meeting of the Leicester Aquinas Society, March 15th, 1937.

Without further preamble it might be well to walk round the hymn as such, and have a good look at it, perhaps even analyse it by its causes. The hymn is not a metaphysical abstraction: it is definitely in the practical order, a concrete thing which a man has to make up to be sung, and to be heard. We should therefore establish its Final Cause or Purpose first of all: its purpose is the Praise of God, or God-to-be-praised. From this comes its Formal Cause, which is specified by its purpose—a song of praise to God: its Material Cause—(1) articulate words sung to (2) musical notes: its Efficient Cause—(1) a Composer of (a) a Poem, and (b) a Melody; (2) a Community to sing the hymn. That forms a bare analysis of the hymn, which St. Augustine termed "Praise of God with songs." For its complete activity it must be sung, sung by a community stimulated by the impulse of a common belief and a strong emotion. If it is to be a good hymn it will be compounded of poetry and melody, each springing from the same kind of inspiration that worked in a Shakespeare or a John Sebastian Bach. As regards its poetic form it is lyrical in character and can be subjected to the same criteria as other poetry. In fact, having regard to its lofty theological purpose, God-to-be-praised, the standards by which it must be rated would seem to demand great strictness. There is a right word of praise and a wrong one, a right note or cadence and a wrong one: it must fulfil its high purpose as perfectly as possible, and to do that it must be hammered and beaten, like any other human achievement, upon the anvil of human criticism and experience. It must be examined like every other art-form devoted to the service of God, which is similarly judged by its due conformity with its Final Cause. The fact that a bad and meretricious piece of verse is put to a shoddy tune, and called a hymn because it is sung in church, does not thereby make it a good piece of work; it remains and always will remain a bad piece of work quite unworthy of its object.

Poetry and music alone will not make a good hymn: even granting these qualities the hymn may remain unacceptable to the community. This may be due to a lack of sympathy with its teachings; "Hail Holy Queen" is not sung in most

Nonconformist chapels. It may be due to different standards of cultivation or taste or education; the hymn may be too highbrow or perhaps even too lowbrow. The final test of the hymn seems to be the response it awakens in the community. People will sing the hymn because it expresses a belief so firmly held that there is a strong emotional impulse to sing about it—or even dance about it. The same belief must inspire the composers as inspires the faithful, otherwise there will be no *rapport*, nor sympathy. A hymn written by a very academic Professor of English Literature, copying the best models of the classic period, would hardly be a success in an East-End Mission. But if he were stimulated by a belief held with a burning enthusiasm, his inspiration coupled with his academic experience might produce a masterpiece hailed with joy by stevedores as well as by school teachers! To achieve the immortality of universal appeal demands a great directness and simplicity of expression, a freedom from artificiality and a resolute avoidance of cloying sentiment, which might suit one class or generation but would quite certainly disgust others. The good hymn must have body, i.e., be virile and uncompromising in expression: its claim to universality must not rest upon the Lowest Common Multiple of human agreement about a highly problematic deity—the sort of hymn that every brand of religion can sing without scandal or offence, even to the most uncompromising rationalist! The hymn of the people who believe that one religion is as good as another and that all religion is the same in the long run has yet to be written: when it is, it will hardly fill its adherents with the zeal of men fired to heroic action by some blinding revelation of Divine Truth or Love. It will be without form and void, like the evaporated pabulum that passes for religious teaching in Council Schools.

Are there hymns that in any case seem to fulfil the exacting conditions of high inspiration, simplicity and direct appeal to a great variety of peoples? A good number of the Psalms, the *Gloria in excelsis*, the *Te Deum*, the *Veni Creator*, leap to the mind at once. Yet even in the case of these, universality of appeal must be considered relatively,

BLACKFRIARS

in that they find a response only in those who are bred in the tradition that produced them. A commonly held Faith is certainly essential, but some human factors must be taken into account. Of these factors we may mention a common cultural tradition, which has given rise to literary forms and conventions which we accept as part of our living experience. Poetry and melody born of the culture that we inherit will appeal spontaneously to us: if the roots of our traditions are Latin we shall respond readily to the literary traditions of ancient Rome, and of the medieval Christendom which flowered from it. Christendom is vast enough in its embrace, however, to consecrate to its service many other cultures besides those of the ancient European world that centred upon the Mediterranean: Persia, India and China may yet produce Christian hymnody based upon their native cultural traditions. Such hymns to us might make no direct appeal, especially as regards their music, with its unfamiliar rhythms and melodic structure of quarter-tones.

Within the compass of a single historic culture art-forms seem to follow a rhythmic cycle of rise and fall. A period of spontaneous growth produces a climax of achievement: conventions become fixed and there follows a period of decadence, until change of material conditions, war, bodily pestilence, or intellectual revolt breaks the old and prepares the way for a new cycle. In the history of Western Europe the 5th and 6th centuries, with the flowering of Roman Byzantine Art Forms, the brief Carolingian Renaissance at the turn of 8th and 9th centuries, the 12th and 13th, the 15th and 16th centuries, seem in some respects to have touched high peaks of human achievement. Linking them all, however, is a common theological belief and, if I may dare to say so, a common metaphysical substratum, or as it might be put to-day, universal and unquestioning acceptance of recognised values drawn from a double source, Divine Revelation and the wisdom of classical antiquity, the one invigorating the other with the fire of its fresh enthusiasm. This marriage of Christianity with the Ancient World produced each successive cycle up to the 16th century. Predominant among the art-forms that these centuries pro-

duced is the writing of Christian hymns, which provide the one unbroken link between the poetry of the ancient and the modern worlds. In the Dark and the Middle Ages the Christian Hymn was the predominant form of inspired poetic expression. It was as though Keats, Shelley, Byron, Swinburne, Eliot, or Ezra Pound had expended their genius in the composition of nothing but Liturgical Hymns. The hymns which the Dark and early Middle Ages have bequeathed to us through the agency of the Latin Liturgy will stand up to a prolonged and exacting human scrutiny; and despite that most dessicating experience, they can still evoke century after century in the communities that sing them a great satisfaction of spirit and theocentric stimulus.

Christianity from its beginnings had this advantage: it inherited an inspired literature which it quickened with its own fresh vitality. Among the books of Messianic Promise, that in most frequent use both in the Jewish and Christian worship has been the Psalter, with its songs of Divine Praise cast in the poetic form used by the Hebrew people from about the 9th century before Christ. They still remain unsurpassed for lyric beauty and for their sense of the Divine Presence and Protection. Despite their obviously Oriental and antique dress they are still the main component of Christian worship and can thrill singers and readers in the most widely separated circumstances by their inspired response to the whole range of man's emotional experience. Generally speaking the Catholic laity know little of them, and the clergy repeat them day by day in a dead language. The most readable version in English is to be found in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer: for those familiar with Latin, the Vulgate, translated by St. Jerome, will clearly bring a rich reward whether it be used for study or for prayer.

In the early history of the Western Church Latin was the common possession of all the Faithful, who were incorporated into the Church's Liturgical worship, not only by their understanding of the letter, but by a full sympathy with its spirit. Christian worship in the Latin Rite developed along corporate and popular lines; it belonged to the worshipping

BLACKFRIARS

community, who played an integral part in its performance; it derived its characteristic features from Roman moderation and sobriety. Much of its sustenance was drawn from Hellenistic and Judaeon soil, but the organism itself was Latin and was redolent with the ancient Roman *pietas* and *gravitas*. It grew out of an age when the proletariat would rise in a body to do honour to the poet Virgil as he entered the theatre at a reading of his poems. Poetry of that calibre is hardly the staple diet of the masses to-day, who lack that discrimination which made the common people of Rome such willing converts to the Faith. In this world, the world of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, the Christian hymn was born and quickly sprang to maturity. It was written for men and women whose reading and literary experience were formed upon the prose and poetry of the age of Cicero and Virgil. The dominant period of the Christian Latin hymn runs for nearly a thousand years, reaching its climax in the Eucharistic Hymns of Aquinas and the more romantic note struck by the early Franciscans, for example, by Jacopone da Todi, in the *Stabat mater*.

With St. Ambrose (died c. 397), the Father of the Latin Hymn, we find a standard of composition set for every Christian hymn which follows. Those which were written by the Saint himself were written with the object of encouraging the Milanese Christians in their struggle against the Arian heretics led by the Empress and the Court. They are ideal for congregational use; short and complete in themselves, easy and yet elevated in expression; terse and masculine in thought; simple and untechnical in their presentation of the facts and teaching of Christianity. To quote a recent writer of authority:² "these hymns mark the beginning not merely of the Christian lyric, but also of true Christian poetry in the West. They appear as the ripest fruit of the process of assimilation on the part of Christianity of the formal education of the ancient world." The Christian spirit here controls an artistic form inherited from the

² F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian Latin Poetry, from the beginnings to the close of the Middle Ages*. (Clarendon Press, 1927.) I have drawn freely from this invaluable book for examples and information.

THE HYMNS THEY DESERVE

ancient world. The metre of these hymns, the iambic dimeter becomes so popular that it receives the alternative name of the Common or Ambrosian Metre. St. Augustine, his friend, gives us in the matchless words of his *Confessions* the circumstances which gave rise to these great hymns:

“It was about a year from the time when Justina, mother of the boy-emperor Valentinian, entered upon her persecution of Thy holy man Ambrose, because he resisted the heresy into which she had been seduced by the Arians. The people of God were keeping ward in the Church ready to die with Thy servant their Bishop. Among them was my mother, living unto prayer, and bearing a chief part in that anxious watch. Even I myself, though as yet untouched by the fire of Thy Spirit, shared in the general alarm and distraction. Then it was that the custom arose of singing hymns and psalms, after the use of the Eastern provinces, to save the people from being utterly worn out by their long and sorrowful vigils. From that day to this it has been retained, and many, I might say all Thy flocks, throughout the rest of the world now follow our example.” The Basilica of Milan, beset by the soldiery of Valentinian, first heard the strains of Catholic hymnody in which Ambrose set forth the doctrines of the orthodox faith. Of them St. Augustine says:

“What tears did I shed over the hymns and canticles, when the sweet sound of the music of Thy Church thrilled my soul! As the music flowed into my ears and Thy truth trickled into my heart, the tide of devotion swelled high within me, and the tears ran down, and there was gladness in those tears.” Sorrowing in secret for his mother’s death —“for the bitterness of my sorrow could not be washed from my heart”—he remembered as he lay upon his bed the verses of Ambrose:

deus creator omnium
polique rector, vestiens
diem decoro lumine,
noctem soporis gratia.
artus solutos ut quies
reddet laboris usui,
mentesque fessas allevet,
luctusque solvat anxios.

Creator of the earth and sky,
Ruling the firmament on high,
Clothing the day with robes of light
Blessing with gracious sleep the night,
That rest may comfort weary men,
And brace to useful toil again,
And soothe awhile the harassed mind,
And sorrow’s heavy load unbind.

BLACKFRIARS

The immense popularity of the Ambrosian hymns gave rise to hundreds written in the same metre, and their admission into the Liturgy has led to great uncertainty as to which were really the work of the Bishop of Milan. Among those written in the same spirit, which express the same simplicity and fervour may be mentioned the Office Hymns for Compline: *Te lucis ante terminum* and *Christe qui lux es et dies*.

The next great poet to consider is Prudentius (died 405), a Spanish layman trained in the traditional humanist culture, "weeping," he tells us, "under the rod of the schoolmaster as he learnt his Virgil and Horace." After a lifetime in the Imperial Service he spent his closing years in writing poetry of a markedly Christian character. To quote his own words:

"My poems are the work of a middle-aged official who wishes to make amends for the uselessness of his past life by singing the praise of God, fighting heresies, unfolding the Catholic Faith, trampling on heathen rites, overturning idols and celebrating the martyrs and apostles."

His two greatest poems are the **KATHERMERINON**, a series of hymns to illustrate the Christian's day, and the **PERISTEPHANON** which sings the praises of the Christian martyrs. During his lifetime he witnessed the impressive change which made a pagan Empire Christian; and in regard to this it is noteworthy that he was the first Christian poet to make use of the new mythology derived from Old Testament Stories. All former writers had drawn exclusively from pagan mythology, which from now on until the 16th century is forbidden territory to the Christian singer. Before leaving him let us take a brief glance at the pathetic verses which picture the Innocents, the first martyrs of Christ playing by the side of God's altar with the palms and crowns which are the tokens of their reward.

salvete flores martyrum
quos lucis ipso in limine
Christi insecutor sustulit,
ceu turbo nascentes rosas:

All hail ye little Martyr flowers
Sweet rosebuds cut in dawning hours!
When Herod sought the Christ to find
Ye fell as bloom before the wind.

THE HYMNS THEY DESERVE

vos primaChrista victima, First victims of the Martyr bands,
grex immolatorum tener, With palms and crowns in tender
aram ante ipsam simplices hands
palma et coronis luditis. Around the very altar, gay
And innocent, ye seem to play.

The latter half of the 6th century introduces us to Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers. An Italian educated in the Imperial city of Ravenna, with the very churches and mosaics surviving to the present day which he must have looked at in his boyhood. Cured of a disease in his eyes by invoking the help of St. Martin, he set out on pilgrimage to his shrine at Tours, but took his time in getting there. For some years he stopped at Metz in Lorraine enjoying the hospitality of King Sigebert, with whom he travelled over Eastern France, acting as a kind of public orator for the Court. After visiting Tours, he finally settled down at Poitiers which became his home. He found the consolations of a lasting friendship with two women of remarkable gifts and high cultivation of mind, Queen Radegund and the Abbess Agnes. In a series of epigrams and epistles the poet renders grateful thanks for gifts of food and fruit, and even for the dinners of many courses with which the Queen loaded his table. The Convent of Poitiers, we must add, inspired him with a very great reverence for the religious life which colours his poems. From all that we know of him he must have been an altogether delightful man of a mellow humour.

Venantius forms a living link between the Roman and medieval world: he is filled with a Christian and Catholic emotion which transcends the classical tradition of his upbringing: some of his finest poems are those immortal and lovely hymns which we sing on Good Friday, *Vexilla Regis prodeunt*, and *Pange lingua* (the model taken by St. Thomas for his Eucharistic Hymn) written in Trochaic Tetrameters, the metre of the marching songs to which countless legionaries must have swung steadily along the straight roads they had built to keep the peace of Rome. Two other hymns may be noted, the great processional *Salve festa dies*, more familiar to Anglicans as "Hail thee Festival Day," and the Matins Hymn in Our Lady's Office, *Quem terra pontus*

BLACKFRIARS

aethera, probably familiar to Dominican Tertiaries.

There is little time for quotation, but it is impossible to leave Venantius without repeating his matchless lines upon the Cross:

crux fidelis, inter omnes arbor una nobilis
nulla talem silva profert flore fronde germine,
dulce lignum, dulces clavos dulce pondus sustinens!

flecte ramos, arbor alta, tensa laxa viscera,
et rigor lentescat ille quem dedit nativitas,
ut superni membra regis mite tendas stipite.

Faithful Cross! above all other
One and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom,
None in fruit thy peer may
be;
Sweetest wood and sweetest
iron!
Sweetest weight is hung on
thee.

Bend, O lofty Tree, thy
branches,
Thy too rigid sinews bend;
And awhile the stubborn hardness,
Which thy birth bestowed,
suspend;
And the limbs of heaven's high
Monarch,
Gently on thine arms extend.

Another voice rings out from the darkness of the 7th century—an unknown voice—with perhaps the most striking of all the hymns which the Church has incorporated into her Prayer. It runs in the same marching rhythm as the last, and is still sung for the Feasts of Church Dedication:

Urbs beata Jerusalem dicta pacis visio
quae construitur in caelis vivis ex lapidibus,
et angelis coronata ut sponsata comite,

nova veniens e caelo, nuptiali thalamo
praeparata, ut sponsata copuletur domino;
plateae et muri ejus ex auro purissimo:

portae nitent margaritis adytis patentibus,
et virtutue meritorum illuc introducitur
omnis qui ob Christi nomen hic in mundo premitur.

tusionibus, pressuris expoliti lapides,
suis coaptantur locis per manum artificis,
disponuntur permansuri sacris aedificis.

THE HYMNS THEY DESERVE

<p>Blessed city, heavenly Salem, Vision dear of peace and love, Who, of living stones up- builted, Art the joy of heaven above, And with Angel cohorts circled, As a bride to earth doth move!</p>	<p>Bright with pearls her portals glitter They are open evermore; And, by virtue of his merits, Thither faithful souls may soar, Who for Christ's dear name in this world Pain and tribulation bore.</p>
<p>From celestial realms descend- ing, Bridal glory round her shed, To his presence, decked with jewels, By her lord shall she be led: All her streets and all her bul- warks, Of pure gold are fashioned.</p>	<p>Many a blow and biting sculp- ture Fashioned well those stones elect, In their places now compacted By the heavenly Architect, Who therewith hath willed for ever That his palace should be decked.</p>

There is here sparkling imagery, boldness and accuracy of metaphor—but even the fine translation fails at the second stanza: the mystic marriage bed and union of Christ and the Church are discreetly veiled by the words “to his presence.” For those familiar with the imagery and richness of the Song of Songs and the Apocalypse, the hymn will be full of light and radiance: this mystical Union of Christ and His Bride the Church developed from St. Paul’s teaching is expressed in unmistakably direct terms, which would cause no small stir if they were introduced into a hymn to-day. The metaphor of the living building of which you and I are the stones, who, to fit in their proper place, must receive many a blow and biting sculpture, tells us plainly what the Christian needs: he needs knocking into shape if he is to fit into his destined place in the Heavenly Jerusalem.

The early 9th century affords a mine of good hymns, which came from the scholars whom the Emperor Charlemagne had gathered round him. These were men of the highest literary gifts, well read and thoroughly humanist in outlook. Court and School moved from place to place together and the Emperor enlisted his family, male and female,

BLACKFRIARS

among its pupils. He was "David and Solomon" among his learned friends, each of whom received a literary sobriquet. Alcuin, the Englishman from York, was "Horatius Flaccus," Angilbert was "Homer," Theodulf was "Pindar." Of these Theodulf, Bishop of Orleans, is outstanding as a poet. He was a man of wide reading who found his chief delight in reading Virgil and Ovid, whom he calls the "loquacious Naso." On the death of Charlemagne he was unwittingly involved in a plot against the Emperor's successor, Lewis, and was imprisoned at Angers. While there he poured out his sorrows in song and verse. The crowning achievement of his literary genius is the hymn that is sung all over the Catholic world on Palm Sunday:

Gloria laus et honor tibi sit Rex Christe Redemptor
Cui puerile decus prompsit Hosanna pium.

All Glory Praise and Honour to Thee Redeemer King,
To whom the lips of children do sweet Hosannas sing.

The Emperor Lewis was taking part in the great procession on Palm Sunday in Angers. As it moved from station to station in the city it came to a halt beneath the tower where Theodulf was imprisoned. Suddenly high above the crowds was heard the "Gloria laus" chanted loudly and melodiously. The Emperor was delighted and asked the name of the unknown singer. He was told that it was his own prisoner, Theodulf. "Then," says the chronicler, "was the merciful and gentle monarch moved with compassion, and from that hour he delivered and pardoned him, and sent him back to his church at Orleans absolved and quit of the crime whereof he had been accused." Such a legend is worthy of so magnificent a hymn and so great a man. One other noble hymn comes to us as the fruit of this literary renaissance at the dawn of the 9th century, the *Veni Creator Spiritus*. It is too familiar to all of us to need more than this reference. An uncertain tradition assigns it to Raban Maur, who by training and sympathy belonged to the same school as Theodulf.

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(Part II will appear in the July issue)