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## WHEN ST. THOMAS SANG OF GOD<sup>1</sup>

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HE true poet is a realist. He takes the wonderful things we call common-place and highlights them with the magic of a word. He removes the grime of boredom from the enchantment of the real. We are not wafted into the realm of "never-never" fancy. We are raised to the exhilaration of life realized. The poets lilt about the things of this world, but try as they might they find their straining voices break before the awesomeness of the reality of the divine. God's best singers on this earth are the saints. They scorn the icy muteness of human tongue for the vibrant warmth of love lived. But God is merciful, and in His mercy has moved some of these divine lovers to bursts of song even our tuneless souls can hum.

One of those closest to the lyric courts of Heaven was a Dominican, St. Thomas Aquinas. He was bold as only a saint can be. When the figure on the crucifix suddenly spoke out to him: "Thou hast written well of me, Thomas. What would you ask?" St. Thomas, with the staggering audacity of love, replied: "Only Thyself, O Lord!" He had come face to face with the Reality of realities and wished only an embrace, an eternal embrace. Like a true Dominican he did not cling to our Lord without calling to all who would to share his happiness. That call has echoed down the years in his beautiful Eucharistic hymns.

To analyse those paens of adoration may seem like dissecting the pleasure of a smile or the merriness of children's laughter, but St. Thomas' hymns, far from being chilled by the cold criticism of

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reason, warm the very instrument which set out so coolly to appraise them. We cannot hope to set flying all the sparks in the fiery stanzas. We are dealing with an angelic mind and a saintly heart, and we can at best but faintly suggest the depths of its wisdom and the heights of its love.

### I. *Adoro Te Devote*

Often sung in whole or in part at Benediction, the *Adoro Te* is not a liturgical hymn in the sense that it is officially an Office or Mass hymn. Usually found among the prayers of thanksgiving to be said after Holy Mass or Communion, it is an inspiring example of rhymed prayer expressed in graceful simplicity. We will examine the *Adoro Te* in stanzaic fashion and try to give some hint of its love-enriched thought.

"Adoro te devote, latens Deitas,  
Quae sub his figuris vere latitas;  
Tibi se cor meum totum subjicit,  
Quia Te contemplans totum deficit."

Translation: "I devoutly adore Thee, O hidden Deity, Who truly liest hidden under these figures. My whole heart subjects itself to Thee, for it finds itself wholly lost in contemplating Thee."

*Adoro!* This is the theme of the poet's soul. Not in triumph, anger, despair, but in adoration is his voice lifted to the God Who alone is worthy of adoration, that homage which acknowledges utter dependence. He offers his prayer *devoutly*, for his devotion must be the reverence due to the Eucharistic God. Trembling at the realization of the presence of God, he cries with Jacob: "How terrible is this place! This is no other but the house of God, and the gate of heaven!" (Genesis 28, 17). A strain of Isaias then springs into his song: "Verily thou art a hidden God" (Isaias 45, 15), the God of the Mass *hidden* under the *figures* of bread and wine, the God of the tabernacle hidden under the species of bread alone. The poet is overwhelmed at this divine humility, this infinite generosity. He cannot equal God's gift of Himself, but he will subject his *heart*, all that makes him what he is, to the Divine Giver. He is but following our Lord's bidding to love God "With thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, with thy whole mind . . ." (Matthew 22, 37). He had begun with stout-hearted words, but now he falters and is lost in almost wordless *contemplation*. Mere words seem to be but empty

symbols. The music of poetry now seems but a shallow dissonance. "How lovely are Thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! my soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God" (Psalm 83, 2/3).

"Visus, gustus, tactus in Te fallitur  
Sed auditu solo tuto creditur;  
Credo quidquid dixit Dei Filius,  
Nil hoc Veritatis verbo verius."

Translation: "Sight and taste and touch are deceived in Thee, but by hearing alone do we safely believe; I believe whatever the Son of God hath said; and nothing is more true than that word of Truth."

St. Thomas the realist is speaking. Here is humiliation for the self-sufficient complacency of those who glory in their senses. They cannot sense that the ruby wine and the lowly bread are the Great Reality. They must rely on *hearing*, and by hearing St. Thomas means faith. "Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ" (Romans 10, 17). Faith is fundamentally a matter of authority, a matter of who says a thing. St. Thomas admits his faith and points to his authority—the God Who "can neither deceive nor be deceived." Nothing is more true than the word of God, for though men can say, "I speak the truth. I know the truth. I love the truth," only God can say, "I am the Truth" (John 14, 6). Christ had clearly said: "This is My Body; This is My Blood." He took extraordinary pains to make this doctrine of the Eucharist clear. We read in the Gospels of His teaching it and of its effect. "After this many of His disciples went back, and walked no more with Him." Then Jesus said to the twelve: "Will you also go away?" St. Thomas also hears that question and answers with St. Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life" (John 6 67/69).

"In cruce latebat sola Deitas,  
At hic latet et Humanitas:  
Ambo tamen credens, atque confitens,  
Peto quod petivit latro poenitens."

Translation: "On the Cross was concealed only Thy Divinity, but here is concealed Thy Humanity as well; nevertheless, believing and confessing both, I ask what the penitent thief asked."

We are at the tragedy of Good Friday. Christ, Who was crucified chiefly because He had called himself the Son of God, is hanging on the Cross. He seems so completely powerless, so unlike God, that His enemies delight in taunting Him: "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the Cross" (Matthew 27, 40). Suddenly with a loud cry He gives up His life. Then, ". . . the veil of the temple was rent in two from the top even to the bottom, and the earth quaked, and the rocks were rent, and the graves were opened, and many bodies of the saints that had slept arose . . ." (Matthew 27, 51/52). He had answered His tormentors, and ". . . the centurion and they that were with him watching Jesus, having seen the earthquake and the things that were done, were sore afraid, saying: 'Indeed this was the Son of God'" (Matthew 27, 54).

The centurion in fear had cried out his belief, but St. Thomas pours out his own in love. His soul genuflects before the mystery of the Eucharist. There are no signs of Christ's Divinity here; there is not even a sign of His Humanity. Still the Dominican not only *believes* in their real presence, but publicly *confesses* his faith. He makes but one petition, that grace-inspired petition of the penitent thief: "Lord, remember me when Thou shalt come into Thy kingdom" (Luke 23, 42). St. Thomas remembers the answer of Christ: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23, 43). We who are so timid are strengthened when we, too, recall that Heaven was taken for the asking. The highest gift in God's command, in a sense, the gift of faith, was withheld from the proud high priests and the leaders of the people and bestowed on a despised thief who threw himself to the mercy of God.

"Plagas, sicut Thomas, non intueor  
Deum tamen meum Te confiteor.  
Fac me Tibi semper magis credere,  
In Te spem habere, Te diligere."

Translation: "I do not behold Thy wounds as Thomas did; yet I confess Thee to be my God. Make me ever more and more believe in Thee, hope in Thee, and love Thee."

"Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails and put my hands into His side, I will not believe" (John 20, 25). The disciples must have been shocked and saddened at this declaration of the apostle Thomas. In sheer joy they had told him how Christ had appeared to them, had risen from the dead just as He foretold. And

Thomas must have been shocked as he was certainly saddened when Christ condescended to re-appear and bade him to see and touch the wounds of Him Whom he had doubted. With tear-stricken grief he confessed in anguish: "My Lord and my God" (John 20, 28).

Centuries later, another Thomas would protest that he was no doubter, that he longed to be among those blessed "that have not seen, and have believed" (John 20, 29). He begged for *faith* that he might believe without doubting, for *hope* that he might trust without measure; for *love* that he might be worthy of the Eternal Lover. He was not hesitant in his request. He knew that the God of the tabernacle had promised: "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Matthew 7, 7).

"O memoriale mortis Domini,  
Panis vivens vitam praestans homini,  
Praesta meae menti de Te vivere,  
Et Te illi semper dulce sapere."

Translation: "O Memorial of the Lord's death! O Living Bread that givest life to man: grant to my soul ever to live on Thee, and grant Thou mayst ever taste sweet to it."

When we sing these four gracefully limpid lines, we are singing with the tongues of St. Paul and the psalmist, we are re-echoing the words of Christ Himself. *O Memorial of the Lord's death!* As St. Paul puts it: "... as often as you shall eat this Bread, and drink the chalice, you shall show the death of the Lord, until He come" (I Corinthians 11, 26). *O Living Bread!* The very words of Christ Who said: "I am the Living Bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this Bread, he shall live forever" (John 6, 51/52). Can we live on Christ? Did not He pledge: "He that eateth Me, the same also shall live by Me" (John 6, 58). Is this truth hard and bitter to swallow? "O taste and see that the Lord is sweet" (Psalm 33, 9). All this is not so much metaphor. What could be more sweet on this earth than that most intimate moment when Creator comes into creature, and love's flame kindles the heart as a vigil light in the living temple of the living God.

"Pie Pelicane, Jesu Domine  
Me immundum munda Tuo Sanguine,  
Cuius una stilla salvum facere  
Totum mundum quit ab omni scelere."

Translation: "O Loving Pelican, Jesus Lord! cleanse me, who am unclean, in Thy Blood, one drop of which hath power to save the whole world from all its sin."

The considerate St. Thomas gleams beneath these lines. He was writing a prayer not only for himself and for the learned, but also for the unlettered to sing from memory. The symbol of the pelican would mean much to those whose bible was the unparalleled stain-glass windows of the medieval cathedrals. They would know the legend that when food fails, the pelican feeds her young with her own blood. They had, perhaps, even seen her pictured standing over her nest, with wings spread apart, wounding her own breast to nourish her little ones. *O loving Pelican, Jesus Lord!*—this would bring to their minds the sagging figure on the Cross Who shed every drop of His precious Blood for them, for us. The hush of awe would steal into their voices as they realized the power of that Blood. This is the Blood which gives such power to the Sacraments. When the absolving words of the priest are pronounced over us in the tribunal of Penance, the very Blood of Christ is washing our souls of sin, for He it is "Who hath loved us and washed us from our sins in His own Blood" (Apocalypse 1, 15).

"Jesu, quem velatum nunc aspicio,  
Oro fiat illud quod tam sitio:  
Ut Te revelante cernens facie,  
Visu sim beatus Tuæ gloriæ."

Translation: "O Jesus, Whom I now behold veiled, I pray that this—for which I thirst—may come to pass: beholding Thee with Thy countenance revealed, I may be happy in the vision of Thy glory."

The poet has ended his cadences of belief. Now he pleads that he may one day see Him in Whom he has such faith. "As the hart panteth after the fountains of water: so my soul panteth after Thee, O God. My soul hast thirsted after the strong living God: when shall I come and appear before the face of God?" (Psalm 41, 2/3). Wisely, St. Thomas refrains from describing the indescribable—Heaven is not builded with the straw of words. The song of faith has finished on a note of hope, and the note of hope throbs with overtones of love.

(To be continued.)