

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS

(A Study of the Divine Office for Christmas Morning.)

In his sixth sermon on the Nativity of Our Lord, St. Leo tells us why no feast throughout the entire course of the year makes so strong and wide an appeal to the mind and heart of man as does Christmas. "The generation of Christ," he says, "is the origin of the Christian people; and the Birthday of Him Who is our Head is the birthday of us who are His body." "The splendor of the mystery of Christmas dazzles the understanding but inundates the heart with joy. It is the consummation of the designs of God in time and the endless subject of admiration and wonder to the angels and saints, nay, it is the source and cause of their beatitude."¹ Christmas then is essentially a religious festival and without its religious observance, it is meaningless. And so it is only fitting that Holy Church in her liturgy—which completes the tribute of man's worship of his Creator—should reach such incomparable heights of inspiration as she attains in the Offices of Christ's Birthday.

Volumes might be written in explanation of the beauties of the Christmas Office; but we must confine ourselves to a brief study of Matins, which is the most solemn in the liturgy.

Shortly before midnight, the Church commences her Divine Office of Matins with the usual prayers, Pater and Credo and the invocation:

- V. O Lord, thou wilt open my lips.
- R. And my mouth shall declare thy praise.
- V. Incline unto my aid, O God.
- R. O Lord, make haste to help me.
- V. Glory be to the Father, etc.
- R. As it was in the beginning, etc.

Then follows the Invitatory: *Christus natus est nobis Venite adoremus,—*"Christ is born unto us. Come let us adore." In these words of the angels who announced the "glad tidings," for which the world had been longing during four thousand years, the Church invites us to adore the Infant God who is born "for" us. Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem, descendet de coelis. The two parts of this Invitatory are now

¹ The Liturgical Year, Vol. I.

alternately said or sung after each verse of Psalm 94, Venite, exultemus Domine, etc. "Come let us praise the Lord with joy." The entire psalm, according to St. Paul, (Heb. III, 7) refers to Jesus Christ.

Immediately after the Invitatory is the magnificent Hymn, *Christe Redemptor Omnium*. This hymn, composed by St. Ambrose (A. D. 304-397), sings of the glory and beauty of Christ's Birthday, at the same time embodying such fundamental dogmas of the faith as: (1) the divine origin of the Son of God made man; (2) the doctrine of our Redemption by His precious blood; (3) the divine Maternity of Mary. Though no translation has done it full justice the accompanying translation² may be said to be fairly representative of its thought and spirit.

O Christ, Redeemer of us all,
The Father's Sole Begotten Son,
Born ere time began to run
O mystery ineffable.

The splendor of the Father thou,
Of humankind the living hope,
Aid all that under heaven's cope
Before thy holy presence bow!

Remember, O Creator Lord,
That from the stainless Virgin's womb
The flesh of man thou didst assume
To save man's flesh from guilt abhorred.

And lo, this day that gave thee birth
Shall glorify thy holy name,
Who from the Father's bosom came,
Sole Son and Savior of the earth.

The heavens, the earth, the rolling seas,
And all that live beneath the skies
Uplift to thee adoring eyes
And hail thee with new harmonies.

And Savior, we with souls bedewed
In thy redeeming blood, upraise

² By D. J. Donahoe, "Early Christian Hymns."

The tribute of our earnest praise,
Bowed down in holy gratitude.

Let endless power and glory be
To Christ whom stainless Virgin bore;
The Sire and Paraclete adore,
With equal love eternally. Amen.

All that has gone before is by way of prelude to the body of the Office which is divided into three parts called Nocturns or vigils. Each Nocturn comprises: (1) three psalms each of which is followed by an Antiphon (which as the name indicates "re-echoes" the burden of the psalm preceding it or the dominant note contained therein;) (2) after the third psalm with its Antiphone and Versicle³ come three Lessons with Responsaries.

I NOCTURN

The first psalm of the first Nocturn, Ps. 2: *Quare fremuerunt gentes, celebrates the Kingly dignity of the Babe that is born. Verse 7: Filius meus es tu; ego hodie genui te,*—"Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee," is a Messianic Prophecy on the stupendous miracle of the birth in time and in human nature of the eternal Son of God. There is no question here of mere adoption or accommodation (as some modern critics assert), but of making evident to all the Sonship of the 'Anointed.' The verse is quoted by St. Paul (Acts, XIII, 33) as referring to Christ. This "divine Sonship" is again declared by a voice from heaven at Christ's baptism (Luke III, 22; and Matt. III, 17). To this Son now made manifest to men are given all nations and the fulness thereof. He is to rule the nations sternly and inexorably to repress their pride. The Psalmist then goes on to address the royal foes of the Messianic King, Christ, and admonishes them to accept the situation and make submission to the Anointed One (ver. 2), lest the anger of God overtake and destroy them (ver. 10): *Et nunc reges intelligite: erudimini qui iudicatis terram. Servite Domino in timore: et exultate ei cum tremore,*—"Now, therefore O Kings, be ye wise, Be advised, ye rulers of the earth! Serve the Lord with fear."

The beautiful second psalm, *Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei,*—"The heavens show forth the glory of God, and the firmament

³ See after third Psalm.

declareth the work of His hands," tells of the loveliness of the heavens during the night and of the testimony which the countless stars render to the greatness of their Creator. "Think, my brethren," says St. Augustine, "what His beauty is. All the beautiful things which ye see, which ye love, He made. If these are beautiful, what is He Himself? If these are great, how great is He?" Commentators see in this psalm a Messianic Prophecy in the literal sense. Verses 6 and 7 read: *Exultavit ut gigas ad currendam viam: a summo coelo egressio ejus*,—"He hath rejoiced as a giant to run His way: His going out is from the end of heaven." Today (ver. 15), *Domine adjutor meus et Redemptor meus*, "my helper and my Redeemer," begins His earthly course and that in humility and poverty. The Antiphon which follows this psalm is suggestive of God's glory and brilliancy: "The Lord is as a bridegroom coming out of his bridal chamber." It is the fifth verse of the psalm.

In the third psalm, Ps. 44, we have a third prophecy on the generation of Christ: ver. 3: *Speciosus forma prae filiis hominum, diffusa est gratia in labiis tuis: propterea benedixit te Deus in aeternum*,—"Thou (O Emmanuel) art beautiful above the sons of men; grace is poured out on thy lips: therefore, hath God blessed thee forever." Not only have we patristic testimony regarding the literal Messianic character of this psalm, but also the unmistakable tradition of the Synagogue. Even the Targum renders it: "Thy beauty, O King Messiah, is superior to that of the sons of men." St. Thomas, Calmet and many other authorities refer the psalm's literal sense to the Messiah.

Antiphon. . . .

Versicle: As a Bridegroom. Response: The Lord is coming from His bridal chamber.

We come now to the Lessons of the first Nocturn. These are taken from the prophecies of Isaias whom the Church has followed through the whole of Advent. Isaias is called by the Holy Ghost "the great Prophet" (Ecclus. 48, 25) because he foretold in so clear a manner "the coming of Christ," "the mysteries of our redemption," the "calling of the Gentiles" and the glorious establishment and perpetual flourishing of the Church of Christ.

In the first Lesson (Chap. IX, 1-7) we see the Messiah as the "Prince of Peace." The concluding words of this Lesson

are: "For a Child is born to us, and a son is given to us, and the government is upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called, Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, and the 'Prince of Peace.'" In these words, we have incontrovertible proof of the fact that in the Old Testament the mystery of the Incarnation (Isaias, Chap. VII, 14) was revealed to the Jews precisely under the concept of one person who is both God and Man. The child whom Isaias describes is identical with the Messiah of the other Prophets. In confirmation of this, we have the description of Jesus Christ in St. Luke's Gospel (Chap. II, 10-14); (John, XII, 46); (Matt. IV, 13-16). Add to this the testimony of the Synagogue as well as that of the Fathers. "All things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Me." (Luke, XXIV, 44).

In the second Lesson, (Isaias, LX, 1-8), the same Prophet foretells that all the Gentiles will be admitted into the new city of God, and that it will be their duty to enter it. The Messianic nature of the prophecy is clear from the parallel description of Jerusalem as the center of a theocracy to which all nations shall submit.

The third Lesson portrays the "Messias as the Savior" (Isaias LII, 1-6). Though the Jews at first may have identified the "salvation" promised by Isaias with that from the Babylonian Captivity, they must have seen on their return that these promises referred to the future Messianic age.

Each of the foregoing Lessons has its proper Response.

II NOCTURN

The Psalms of the second Nocturn are as appropriately chosen as those of the first Nocturn. The first psalm, which is number 47 in the Vulgate, *Magnus Dominus*,—"Great is the Lord and exceedingly to be praised," etc., is interpreted as Messianic in a figurative sense, as a hymn of the Christian Church which begins today. In vain will the Princes of the earth seek to destroy her. *Quoniam ecce reges terrae congregati sunt: convenerunt in unum, Ipsi videntes, sic admirati sunt, conturbati sunt, commoti sunt: tremor apprehendit eos*,—"For behold the kings of the earth assembled themselves: they gathered together. They saw, so they wondered, they were troubled, they

were moved: trembling took hold of them." Empires shall pass away and so will persecutions and heresy, but the Church of God will remain. ver. 15: Ipse reget nos in saecula,—“He shall rule us for evermore.”

While it is true that verse 10 of the second psalm (71) is applied in the liturgy to the adoration of the Magi, it would be exegetically incorrect to limit the meaning of the psalm to that event alone. Reges Tharsis, et insulae munera offerent: Reges Arabum et Saba dona adducent, —“The Kings of Tharsis and the Islands shall offer presents: the kings of the Arabians and of Saba shall bring gifts.” The homage of the Magi formed only the beginning of the fulfillment of the prophecy. The Messianic Prophecy,—which the psalm is in a literal sense,—in its adequate meaning has reference to all the Gentiles that are to be converted to Christ. Verse 11th reads: Et adorabunt eum omnes reges terrae: omnes gentes servient ei,—“And all the kings of the earth shall adore him: all nations shall serve him.” Saints Justin, Athanasius and Chrysostom explain the psalm in this way and for this reason: “No earthly king could be referred to here, but Christ, Who alone, could fulfill the predictions of the psalm.”

The Antiphon, which is composed of parts of verses 7 and 8 strikes the keynote of the psalm: Orietur in diebus Domini abundantia pacis, et dominabitur,—“There shall spring up an abundance of peace in the days of the Lord, and He shall reign.”

Benedixisti Domine, psalm 84, is considered Messianic in a figurative sense. Commenting on verse 11th, St. Augustine says: Veritas de terra orta est: et justitia de coelis prospexit,—“Truth is sprung out of the earth: and justice hath looked down from heaven.” Christ is born of a woman. The Son of man hath come forth in flesh. What is truth? The Son of God. What is earth? Flesh. In order that “justitia” (righteousness) might look down from heaven—He justified man by divine grace, by the sacrifice of the Cross. Hence, verse 11th: Justitia et pax osculatae sunt,—“Justice and Peace have kissed.”

The Lessons of this Nocturn are taken from the Sermons of Pope St. Leo the Great. From these few excerpts one can understand why they enraptured the people of Rome in the fifth century. “On this day, dearly beloved, is born our Savior. Let us be glad, for surely, it is a sin to be sad on the Birthday of

that Life, which, ridding us of the fear of death, gladdened us with the promise of immortality. . . . Learn thy own worth, O Christian—for thy price is the blood of Christ. . . . Remember of what Head and of what Body thou art a member. Remember how thou, having been snatched from the power of darkness hast been translated into the Light and Kingdom of God.”

III NOCTURN

The third Nocturn opens with psalm 88, *Misericordias Domini*—“The mercies of the Lord, I will sing forever.” It is a prayer to God to free His people from oppression by sending the promised Messias. Verses 27-30 could refer to none but Christ and hence the psalm is literally Messianic. *Ipse invocabit me: Pater meus es tu: Deus meus, et susceptor salutis meae*,—“He shall cry out to me: thou art my Father, my God and the support of my salvation.” And ver. 28: *Et ego primogenitum ponam illum: excelsum prae regibus terrae*,—“And I will make Him my first-born, high above the kings of the earth.”

The next two psalms are hymns of thanksgiving and joy. They are considered figuratively Messianic, foretelling the coming of the Messias and the establishment of His Kingdom. They are: Ps. 95, *Cantate Domino*,—“Sing ye to the Lord a new canticle: sing ye to the Lord of the earth”; and Ps. 97, *Cantate Domino*,—“Sing ye to the Lord a new canticle: because He hath done such wonderful things.”

Contrary to the ordinary rubric, we now have the beginnings of “three” Gospels which correspond to those of the three Masses of Christmas Day. To each portion of these Gospels is added a Homily (a discourse or sermon) taken from the writings of the Fathers. The portion of the first Gospel is taken from St. Luke (Chap. II), where in two hundred and seventy-seven words is found “the sweetest story ever told.” In the Homily, Pope St. Gregory the Great discourses on the fact of Christ’s Birth and His enrollment according to the edict of the Emperor Augustus.

There is an ancient custom still in vogue, which allows the Emperor—should he be in Rome at the time—to sing this seventh Lesson in the presence of the Pope and Cardinals. This is done in order to honor the Imperial power, whose decrees were the occasion of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem there-

by fulfilling the decrees of God which He had revealed to the Prophets of old.

The eighth Lesson begins with an extract from the same Gospel of St. Luke in which he tells of the shepherds going to the stable of Bethlehem. St. Ambrose, as is his wont, gives us a moral discourse on the words of the Gospel quoted.

The portion of the third Gospel which is the subject of the ninth Lesson is the beginning of the holy Gospel according to St. John. In the Roman Rite, the Homily is taken from the writings of St. Augustine, while the Dominican Rite uses St. John Chrysostom's commentary on the same passage: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The three Homilies and their proper Responses over, a Deacon,⁴ accompanied by a Sub-deacon, Acolyte, Cross-bearer and Thurifer, proceeds to the center of the Choir, and in solemn tone sings: "Initium Sancti Evangelii secundum Mattheum"; then incenses the sacred Missal. After this he sings the "Genealogy of Jesus Christ." (Matt. I, 1-17).

What better way could there be of concluding the Divine Office of Matins than by singing—as the Church directs—that gem of rhythmical prose, the *Te Deum*! By it we can offer to the Infant Jesus those sentiments of adoration, joy, gratitude and love which instinctively fill our heart: Adoration of the "Word made flesh"; joy for He has come to "dwell among us"; gratitude "to God for His unspeakable gift," the Messiah; and finally, love for this "mystery of love."

⁴ According to Dominican Rite.

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