

THE CHRISTMAS SEQUENCE

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EW, we fear, even in this age of gradual liturgical enlightenment, know what a Sequence is, yet there can be no doubt that the two portions of the Proper of the Mass best known to the faithful belong in that category, though the more familiar usage of one of them is extra-liturgical. Every Catholic knows the *Stabat Mater* from his attendance at the Stations of the Cross, though the real place of this hymn is that of the Sequence for the Feast of the Seven Dolors of Our Blessed Lady. The other is the *Dies Irae*, originally written as the Sequence for the First Sunday of Advent, but later transferred to the Requiem Mass. The authorship of both these famous Sequences is doubtful. It is generally agreed, however, that the *Stabat Mater* should be attributed to the Franciscan, Jacapone da Todi (d. 1306). While the consensus of opinion in regard to the *Dies Irae* is in favor of another Franciscan, Thomas of Celano, there seems to be some reason for believing that the real author was the Dominican Cardinal, Latino Malabranca (or Orsini), (d. 1294). This attribution is made by Benedict XIV, the most learned of all the Roman Pontiffs, in his treatise *De Sacrificio Missae*. However, the learned Jesuit Possevinus, in his *Apparatus Sacer*, prefers to refer it to Humbert de Romanis, Master General of the Dominican Order from 1254 to 1263. Echard, on the other hand, concurs in the opinion of Benedict XIV. One thing, at least, is certain; the oldest known text is to be found in a fourteenth-century Dominican Missal.¹

Where the Prose, as the Sequence should really be called, originated is not wholly certain. The theory that it arose at the famous Benedictine Abbey of Saint Gall in Switzerland must be treated with caution, if not wholly rejected.² Probably its origins are to be sought for in France, though it, perhaps, received its definitive form in the Swiss abbey, the home of the celebrated Notker, whose influence,

¹ J. Julian (Ed.), *Dictionary of Hymnology* (London, 1907), art. "Dies Irae."

² cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, XII, 481-5, "Prose" for the whole subject of Sequences.



"Glory to God in the Highest; and on earth peace
to men of good will." (*Luke ii, 14.*)

not only on Sequences, but on the entire development of liturgical music cannot be over-estimated. Notker was born in the Canton of Saint Gall about the year 840 and became a monk in the abbey which gave its name to that Canton, and lived there till his death in 912. Ekkehard IV speaks of him in these words; he was "delicate of body, but not of mind; stuttering of tongue, but not of intellect; pushing boldly forward in things divine, a vessel of the Holy Spirit without equal in his time."³ Such was the man to whom the Sequence owes its greatest development, though he is no longer to be considered, as formerly, its originator.

With regard to the development of the Sequence, six steps can be discerned:

(a) The *Alleluia* was embellished with a lengthly succession of notes on the final syllable *a*, known as a *melisma* or *jubilus*. This succession of notes was called a *sequentia*.

(b) Because of the length of the *melisma*, it was split up into several phrases to permit of breaking points for the singers, and in order further to facilitate its singing, the custom arose of having the various phrases sung by alternate choirs, as is done in the present Prose or Sequence.

(c) A further step was taken when words were added to some, not all, of the phrases. One of the earliest examples of this is to be found in the *Winchester Troper*. "The first three divisions of the *jubilus* are here without any text; they are pure melody sung to the vowel *a*; a text is provided for the fifth division and its repeat; this is again followed by *a* on which the melody was sung; a text has been composed for the eighth and twelfth divisions; the ending is three divisions of the melody without text."⁴

(d) The next step brings us to the Sequence in its true form. Words were now set to every phrase of the *jubilus*. Since this text was without rhyme or rhythm, it was called, and rightly, a "Prose," and the whole thing was styled *sequentia cum prosa* (melody with a text). However the title was thought to be too cumbrous and so was abbreviated by the omission of one of its members. In France it was known as a "Prose," but in Germany as a "Sequence." The French usage seems to be the more apt and was, in fact, the older. The German usage, however, became so general that it was even suggested that *prosa* stands for *pro sa*, which was considered to be the abbreviation for *pro sequentia*.

³ Franz Kampers, "Notker," *Catholic Encyclopedia*, XI, 125.

⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, loc. cit., p. 482, where part of the score is also given.

(e and f) The next two stages show the development of the primitive unrhymed and unrhythmic Prose into one that partakes of the nature of a hymn as, for instance, in the case of the *Lauda Sion* of St. Thomas Aquinas. In fact, by the thirteenth century, the Prose or Sequence came to be written first and then set to music, a complete inversion of the original procedure.

As time passed, Sequences were lavishly multiplied, for at least five thousand, of very varying value, are even now in existence. Nearly every feast was supplied with one or more of them. Some, it must be admitted, were, from a literary and a musical standpoint, absolutely trash. It was, then, a real step forward when they were abolished at the time of the reformation of the Roman Liturgy under Pope St. Pius the Fifth, but it is to be feared that the zeal of the reformers, due especially to their humanistic prejudices, went too far and the mortality of the Sequences was, perhaps, excessive. Of the thousands, and we do not exaggerate, then in use in various parts of the Western Church, with their diversity of rite and of calendar, but five remain in the present Roman Missal, those for Easter, Pentecost, Corpus Christi, the Feast of the Seven Dolors, and the *Missa pro Defunctis*. To these the Dominican Missal adds three; for the feasts of St. Dominic, St. Francis, and the Nativity of Our Lord, of which last we shall now speak.

One characteristic marks all of the Sequences, though in varying degree. Each is a *resumé* of the feast, either of the Saint, or, in the case of feasts of Our Lord, of the mystery celebrated. The finest example of this is, perhaps, the *Lauda Sion*, the Sequence of the Corpus Christi, which is a versified summary of the entire Catholic doctrine concerning the Holy Eucharist. We may, therefore, expect to find in the *Laetabundus* a summary of part, at least, of the Church's teaching with regard to the doctrine of the Incarnation. We are not to be disappointed, as we hope to show after a brief analysis of the Sequence itself.

In the first place it should be noted that it is of the twelfth century and is the work of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153). the last of the Fathers, a profound theologian, a sublime mystic, and one of the greatest Latinists and poets of the Middle Ages, being, perhaps, in this last particular, second only to Adam of St. Victor. From its author we may expect elegance of style and precision of diction,—this we shall mention briefly in a subsequent paragraph—and, from its date, at least some degree both of rhyme and rhythm. Upon close examination we discover a high degree of the latter with a somewhat tentative use of rhyme.

Since the rhythmic structure is not very evident as it stands in the Dominican Missal, where it is printed as a poem of twelve lines with a certain rhythmic structure more clearly:

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| 1. Laetabundus
Exultet fidelis chorus.
Alleluia. | 2. Regem regum
Intactae profudit torus:
Res miranda. |
| 3. Angelus Consilii
Natus est de Virgine:
Sol de stella. | 4. Sol occasu nesciens,
Stella semper rutilans,
Semper clara. |
| 5. Sicut sidus radium,
Profert Virgo filium,
Pari forma. | 6. Neque sidus radio,
Neque mater filio
Fit corrupta. |
| 7. Cedrus alta Libani
Conformata hyssopo,
Valle nostra. | 8. Verbum ens Altissimi
Corporari passus est,
Carne sumpta. |
| 9. Isaias cecinit,
Synagoga meminit,
Nunquam tamen desinit
Esse caeca. | 10. Si non suis Vatibus,
Credat vel gentilibus:
Sibyllinis versibus
Haec praedicta. |
| 11. Infelix propera,
Crede vel vetera:
Cur damnaberis
Gens misera? | 12. Quem docet littera,
Natum considera:
Ipsam genuit
Puerpera. Alleluia. |

We give herewith a prose translation. The compression of the Latin makes it difficult to attempt a version that will be both faithful to the original rhythm and approximate to the literal meaning of the words. The beauty of the rhythm may be found by reading the arrangement given above, and the following translation is, therefore, as literal as possible consonant with intelligibility:

Let the joyful choir of the faithful exult, alleluia.
The womb of the Immaculate has borne the King of Kings. O
thing of wonder!
The Angel of the Counsel is born of a Virgin, the Sun of a star.
The Sun that knows no setting; a star ever gleaming and bright.
As the star its ray, so does the Virgin bring forth her Son.
Neither the star by its ray nor the Mother by her Son is defiled.
The tall cedar of Libanus stoops to the hyssop in our valley.
The Word, Son of the Most High, has deigned to become incarnate,
clothing Himself in flesh.
That Isaias foretold Him the Synagogue remembers, yet never
ceases to be blind.
If she will not believe her own prophets, let her believe those of
the Gentiles, for in the Sybilline oracles was this foretold.
Hasten, unhappy people, believe the ancients; why will you be
damned, or wretched race?
Behold the Child of Whom the Scriptures speak, for Him hath a
Virgin brought forth. Alleluia.

As will be seen from reading the above rearrangement, it consists of twelve verses, or, better, six pairs of similar verses with four distinct rhythmic schemes. The first pair consists of three lines each, the first and last of which have each four syllables, while the middle line has eight. The next three pairs have also three lines, but in this case the first two are of even length, each having seven syllables, while the final line again consists of four. The next pair is like the three preceding, except that it has three seven-syllable lines instead of two. The last pair has a very different structure, consisting, as it does, of four lines having six, six, five, and four syllables respectively, with an *Alleluia* added to the last verse. Just why this scheme was adopted is not clear. Perhaps to those acquainted with St. Bernard's fondness for mystical numbers, the use of the numbers seven, three, and two, and their compounds, may be suggestive.

It is not quite so easy to attempt to bring order out of the rhymes. They seem to be too numerous to be discounted as accidental and yet too inconsistent to be assigned to any real system. The following rhymes may be noted: The second line of the first verse rhymes with the corresponding line of the second, while in the seventh and eighth verses the rhyme is between their respective first lines. In the fourth and fifth and the last four, the rhyme is within the verses themselves. This leaves only the third and fourth without some sort of rhyme which is partly compensated for by the assonance with the verses. The end rhyme, each verse ending in *a*, is, in all probability, to be accounted for by the fact that since the Sequence developed from the *jubilus* on the final *a* of the *Alleluia*, it was customary, especially in early specimens, to end each strophe with that syllable. Thus there is a lack of uniformity in rhyme structure which becomes most noticeable by contrast with the remarkable fidelity to the rule of rhyme evidenced in later Sequences, for example, the *Dies Irae* or the *Lauda Sion*. It is perhaps best to regard this Sequence as representing a stage in the development of the rhymed Sequence, which would naturally attain rhythmic excellence before reaching rhyme perfection.

The space at our disposal prevents any careful analysis of the diction. We can only call attention to that terseness of word and compression of phrase so characteristic of good Latin verse and so difficult to translate into English without paraphrasing. The succession of thought, and even of the same word, or its synonym, in verses three to six, is worthy of notice.

The doctrinal summary of the Sequence is concise. Verse two clearly indicates the Immaculate Conception of Our Lady; three, the real maternity of Mary, as also does verse five. The fourth verse emphasizes the Eternity of the Word, while the next manifests His Virgin birth. In the seventh the humility of Christ in becoming man is made vivid by a pointed simile, while the eighth declares that his humanity is a real one, not merely an apparent one, as the primitive heretics taught. Verses nine and ten point to the prophecies, both pagan and Jewish, of the Incarnation. We cannot stop here to discuss whether or not the Sybilline oracles relative to Christ are genuine; it is sufficient that they were so considered in the Middle Ages. The Sequence opened with a stirring appeal to the faithful to rejoice in the Incarnation, and now it closes with a plea to the Jewish race to lay aside its blindness, to behold Him of Whom the Scriptures tell, and to believe in Him.

Of this Sequence, Dr. John Mason Neale, the most eminent English authority of the last century in this regard, rightly says: "This Sequence or hymn is of rare beauty in its kind and perhaps as widely known as any hymn of the Church."⁵ It was especially popular in England and France, the earliest known form being that of a twelfth century English Gradual. It is to be found also in a thirteenth- or fourteenth-century Paris Missal, which in view of the close relationship between the Dominican and Parisian rites, is probably the source whence the early Dominican liturgists took it. Its use in England was varied. The Sarum (or Salisbury) Missal assigns it as the Sequence for the Fourth Day within the Octave of the Assumption, while the Sarum Breviary also uses it as a hymn for Second Vespers of two of our Lady's feasts, her Purification and her Assumption. The Hereford Missal uses it as the Sequence within the Octave of the Epiphany. Only in the York Missal is it to be found as a Christmas Sequence, although here it is assigned to the Mass at Daybreak, that is, the Second Mass of Christmas, whereas its present Dominican use is for the Third Mass.⁶

Of the accompanying melody it need only be said that it is of real beauty and by its joyful rhythm perfectly adapted to the text.

⁵ *Mediaeval Hymns* (ed. 1851), p. 49, cited by Julian, *op. cit.*

⁶ Julian, *op. cit.*, art. "Laetabundus."