



*Sandro Botticelli
Uffizi Gallery, Florence*

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MIDNIGHT MASS

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"Welcome, all wonders in one night!
Eternity shut in a span,
Summer in winter, day in night,
Heaven in earth, and God in man.
Great Little One! Whose all embracing birth
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth."¹



OLY Mother the Church, mantled in midnight prayers and good works, is once again prepared this Christmas eve to cloister in the crib of the tabernacle, the lovely form of God.

Yes, it is the proud secret of every Catholic heart that holy Mother the Church, keeping green the exquisite and delicate memory of God, is again transforming the days of old, the sublime and holy mystery of God's Christmas eve, into the ever tangible and beautiful reality of a child in its mother's arms. Nations, festive pilgrims in quest of the holy grail, will again adore the loveliest of forms. A hard, cold, leaden people will soon catch the mischievous clear limpid eyes of Jesus, beaming with pure delight. Weary and worn hearts will again linger in the ineffable joy of a baby's countenance. The universe so powerful in its moods, so beautiful in the rising and evening sun, so much the pure reflection of our future home, will pause to watch God play hide-and-seek on the neck of a Virgin Mother. It is the age-old mystery of the Almighty Word leaping down from the throne of heaven. It is the friendship of God cast on the retina of Mary's sinless soul. It is the smile of a Baby God like a rainbow diffusing ærial hues, a drop of God's blood on earthly clay.

But how can this be? How can God be born again? To those who live in the false illusion of sense dreaming, to those who never saw a lovely rose growing on the granite rock of this earth, to those

¹ Crashaw, Richard, *In the Holy Nativity of Our Lord God*.

who do not see the immaculate spring of the Catholic Church transforming earthly bleakness into Mary's garden of delight, nothing can be said. Fault is not to be found with the wayside beggar whose breast is burdened with the tablet, "I am blind." It is his misfortune, and an unspeakable one. For those poor unfortunate souls who lack the vision of grace and have not yet heard the serenity and tranquility of Bethlehem's first midnight serenade, the faithful daily breathe forth sighs to this Baby God that soon there will be but one fold and one shepherd.

But as for Catholic souls who are haunted by the memory of the Incarnation, who forever linger in the simplicity and the grandeur of the eternal crib, who have never forgotten those chords from heaven sounding the joy of angels and peace on earth, the smile of holy Mother the Church bids them come forth tonight from their earthly retreat. Hear the sweet, melodious tones of God's church bell ringing out across the valley of the world, disturbing slumberous thoughts. Its rich mellow voice is merely the sweet monotone of that far flung song of years ago, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will."²

The call of faith bids men disengage themselves from the vanities of earthly tasks; and, like the shepherds of old, the faithful leave the "dead sanctities" of a weary and worn world, and seek the church, the cave where faith will reveal in the splendour of the Mass the inner reality of the Angel's message: "Fear not; for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people. For this day, is born to you a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger."³ The Church will keep her tryst with men; in her sanctuary they shall behold the Word made flesh and dwelling in their midst.

The radio is powerful and clear in its conversation with man. Things hidden from the common knowledge of the world are revealed in its wonderful transmission of voice. By it, the thoughts and deeds of the modern today become the familiar conversations of the home. The cinema in the form of luxurious entertainment flashes before our minds and hearts the world's achievements and follies. The literature and art of a Christian civilization make man conscious of the beauty and worth of the seeming triviality of his daily life.

These are human ways of consecrating the ideal of the human heart, and of inflaming it toward the eternal possession of God. But

² Luke ii, 14.

³ Luke ii, 10-12.

the Church has an infinitely surpassing way of "unlocking the secret chambers of God." In her liturgy, she takes the best that human life has produced in its rare moments of intellectual genius, and under the abiding presence and inspiration of the Holy Ghost she unlocks for the heart of man the Heart of God. It is through this, the liturgy of holy Mother the Church, that on Christmas morn, men are to see the vision of a great love, the offspring of the Eternal Light. The Mass with its beautiful ceremonies, its enchanting music, its graceful movements, is not only a picture of higher things, but the actual realization of those Divine Things on this lonely isle of tears. The Church needs to take the trembling hand of man in the face of this terrible truth, before the reality of which even the angels in heaven are in holy fear.

For now the Catholic world is in eager anticipation of the great Secret of heaven. It is time for Mass. Shepherds, custodians and guardians of a glorious immortality, are ready to bend in humble adoration to those solemn eyes which look down from "Eternity stillness." The rich refrain of the church bell from the tall spire still lingers in their minds. Outside, the quiet dignity of the snowflakes in their downward flight from the pure ceiling of heaven are speaking the language of Mary's joyful heart. From the choir loft, the sweet strains of "Silent Night," fall like angelic fingers on the chords of the human heart, the lyre of wordless prayer. Over there in the corner is a memory of the first crib, with the blessed images of Jesus, Mary and Joseph and those dumb beasts keeping God warm in the cold winter night.

Mass has begun. Our eyes become fastened on the soft garments of the ministers as they continue the sublime mystery of Crib and Cross, the rich and powerful mercy of God for man. Soon the warning of the Elevation bell humbles our hearts in profound reverence for the birth of Christmas day. On bended knees we whisper our adoration to the gleaming white host and golden chalice as they are arched above us. Now in hushed meditation we relive life's most precious secret. In these silent moments we behold in this Mass, the Incarnation of One who loves us tremendously in spite of human folly, One who is constantly pleading with us when wearied of God's heavenly admonitions. This is the true significance of Christmas day! Jesus Christ on our altars renew His humble birth and reveals His great love for man. This is our joy, our peace and our hope. Yes, Christmas, Christ's Mass, is Jesus, true God and true Man. The Mass is the mysterious life of the God-Man on earth. Through it we are born children of heaven and heirs to imperishable crowns;

through it we walk the hard dirt roads of a modern Galilee, Samaria and Judea; through it we find the strength to stand beneath the cross when the heavy mists of doubt and pain envelop us. Through it we see sickness and death, the sisters of sad mortals, transformed into a peaceful resurrection and a quiet ascension into the Eternal Presence of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

So, in the Masses of Christmas day, we relive the tender mercy of God, Jesus, a mere babe from His Father's mansion. The wonderful and holy events of His birth are set around the Mass as stars. But we have here more than the joyous presence of Bethlehem's merrily smiling Child. In the Mass, we have that Child immersed in the sins of the human race, befouled with the wounds and the stigma of Calvary. His tiny feet are worn from the hard mountainous climb of daily living. His head is crowned with a fruitful labor of love. For birth and death are inseparable in this vale of tears. Robert Southwell has pierced the veil of this holy truth and voices it from the lips of his "pretty Babe all burning bright":

"My faultless breast the furnace is, the fuel wounding thorns:
Love is the fire and sighs the smoke, the ashes shame and scorns;
The fuel Justice layeth on, and Mercy blows the coals;
The metal in this furnace wrought are men's defiled souls;
For which, as now on fire I am, to work them to their good,
So will I melt into a bath, to wash them in my blood,
With this he vanish'd out of sight and swiftly shrunk away;
And straight I called into mind that it was Christmas-day."

It is at Communion time that we become most intimate with the blessed mystery of God clad in human flesh. It is then we overhear the whispered counsels of heaven decreeing the birth of Jesus Christ for the salvation of sinners. It is then we see why sin is so hateful. We understand then why our Friend comes in the great and holy sacrifice of the Mass. In a silent exchange of confidence, we learn, how He wishes to become the Master of our souls, lest the world by its lurid calls lead us to the charred temples of hell. Jesus Christ comes into our hearts as He once entered the cloistered cell of Mary's immaculate heart, because there are mighty statesmen, ordering the destiny of nations, who are ready to change sides for a ribbon across their waistcoat—because there are teachers, false preachers with itching ears and their everlasting yeas and everlasting noes, ready to cast men beneath the level of the beast.

Mass is over. It has drawn us a little closer to the heavenly banquet. Already through the Babe of Bethlehem, the Incarnate Word of God, we are slowly transforming our souls into the Prince

⁴ Southwell, Robert, *The Burning Babe*.

of Peace, our unyielding wills into the Great Counsellor, our insignificant lives into the Wonderful One. Holy Mother the Church on this Christmas morn through her liturgy extends in true reality the charm and the celestial graces of Jesus Christ, the Baby God. We are immortal, and our immortality is taking the shape and the form of God's wonderful substantial figure, a child clad in swaddling clothes.

It is our will not only to live in intimate union with Jesus in the cradle of the Mass, but to converse with God in our hearts the entire day. We must make the heavenly music of Christmas eve drown the deadly luring melodies of sin, the familiar sickening sounds that arouse hot blood in our veins. We will not find it too hard to keep the sophistication of the world far from our life, for in the song of Christmas we have heard the voice of a true Friend. We will strive to remain free from the ambitions of the world because beside the banquet of the cradle, we have found our life's ambition, "to live with Jesus Christ." We will be found unmoved by the terrors which the world calls progress, since our years are silently being weaved into the childhood days of innocence when, as in the morning of the world, we are to converse with God in the cool shade of Paradise, unstained by the thought of sin and human shame.