

WHEN ST. THOMAS SANG OF GOD*

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Part II



IF CREATED BEAUTY so enthralls us, what must be the raptures of the saints! What is created beauty before the Beauty that is God? The most lyric-inspiring of earthly vistas is a vast and gloomy wasteland to him who has gazed upon what "God hath prepared for them that love Him."¹ The sweetest of earthly waters is but bitter gall to him who has tasted of the Inexhaustible Fountain. Yet, we must not scorn what God has not scorned to create. Earthly beauty is not a mirage but a shadow of things to come. It is the pale mirroring of the eternal.

St. Thomas saw the hand of God in the things of earth. He strove to grasp that hand by grasping the significance of what that hand had touched. He looked upon the bread which the hand of the Divine Christ had touched, which the words of the Eternal Lord had made the Bread of Life. Here was beauty on the earth more than worthy of the most ecstatic of poetry. He had been requested by Pope Urban IV to sing of this beauty, and in 1264 the saintly Dominican poured forth his transports of love in the first celebration of the Feast of Corpus Christi. In his *Pange lingua, Sacris solemnis* and *Verbum supernum* for the Office of the Feast and in his incomparable sequence *Lauda Sion* for the Mass, St. Thomas stirred the glowing embers of Catholic dogma to a pure flame of love. We can be warmed by this flame whether we be learned or simple, in the depths of depression or the heights of exaltation, for these hymns are liturgical. They do not ask of us a fiery fervor. They are incentives to such fervor. We can remain at the periphery of the flame of love, or we can become a holocaust of praise. It is important to remember this.

We will show some paths of entry into but one of these hymns, the *Pange lingua*. We shall not venture far, for warmth of words cannot equal the white heat of the ineffable. We sing these liturgical hymns in common, but we reach towards their hidden ardor in the secrecy of our hearts.

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¹ I Cor. 2, 9.

Pange Lingua

"Pange, lingua, gloriosi
Corporis mysterium,
Sanguinisque pretiosi,
Quem in mundi pretium
Fructus ventris generosi
Rex effudit gentium."

Translation: "*Sing, O my tongue, the mystery of the glorious Body and of the precious Blood, which the King of the Gentiles, the fruit of a noble womb, shed for the redemption of the world.*"

Sing, O my tongue, for "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh."² With the tongue a desperate Judas forms his cry of despair; with the tongue a repentant Peter sobs in agony his prayer for forgiveness. The fleeting word does not vanish into nothingness. What we speak in time, we hear in eternity. The God Who numbers the hairs on our heads demands an accounting for the movements of our lips. St. Thomas' lips move in prayer, a prayer of praise. What could be more fitting than to have the tongue, upon which the Body and Blood of Our Lord rest at Communion time prepare for that carress with a song of love! What could be more seemly than to urge the tongue to pour forth its choicest words to the Divine Word! The poet tells us of his lofty theme: the Holy Eucharist, the "mystery of faith." The Holy Eucharist must remain a mystery. We cannot understand it; we can only gratefully accept it. We must not allow the cruel fingers of doubt to slip in and strangle our protestations of belief. "I do believe, Lord; help my unbelief."³ Why shouldn't we believe? We have the word of a king, the Eternal King, "Lord of lords and the King of kings."⁴ This Universal King is the *fruit of a noble womb*, for He is the son of Mary—Mary, noble in lineage, for she was of the House of David, Mary, noble in soul, for she is the chosen one of God whom all generations shall call blessed.⁵ This Universal King is the Redeemer of mankind. He is the realization of that moment fraught with eternity when Heaven "stooped to conquer."

² Mt. 12, 34.

³ Mk. 9, 23.

⁴ Apoc. 17, 14.

⁵ Lk. 1, 48.

"Nobis datus, nobis natus
 Ex intacta Virgine,
 Et in mundo conversatus,
 Sparso verbi semine,
 Sui moras incolatus
 Miro clausit ordine."

Translation: "*Given to us, and born for us of a stainless Virgin, He dwelt on earth sowing the seed of the word, and closed in a wondrous manner the days of His earthly sojournings.*"

It is Christmas night—not the Christmas night of Dickens' *Christmas Carol*, not the Christmas night of a well-fed good fellowship. It is the Christmas night of a host of angels, a handful of shepherds, a "just man," a virgin and her child. We do not know exactly what setting nature provided for this night. That matters little. We do know it was the night of *the birth*, the night foretold by Isaiah when he said: "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel."⁶ Christ's coming was an event of personal interest, for Christ was given to us and for us not merely in a general sense but personally. He came not because we proved our worth by our love, but "Because He hath first loved us."⁷

Sparso verbi semine. Christ was the Great Sower,⁸ mankind was the field on which He cast His seed, and "The seed is the Word of God."⁹ The poet does no more than recall to our minds that Christ prepared the fields for the harvest. He poetically states but the bare fact and permits us to stir up the devotion of our hearts with our own meditations on that ministry of love. He reminds us at the end that He Who had lived so wondrous a life closed that life in a wondrous manner, and he goes on to explain:

"In supremæ nocte coenæ
 Recumbens cum fratribus,
 Observata lege plene
 Cibis in legalibus,
 Cibum turbæ duodenæ
 Se dat suis manibus."

⁶ Isaiah 7, 14.

⁷ I John 4, 10.

⁸ Mt. 13, 3 ss.

⁹ Lk. 8, 11.

Translation: *"On the night of the Last Supper, reclining with His brethren—the Law having been fully complied with in regard to legal meats—with His own hands, He gave Himself as Food to the assembled twelve."*

Here is the Last Supper. Christ and His Apostles are gathered about the table. They are reclining as they eat, for such was the custom of the country. All the Old Law is observed. Even the most rigid legalist could find no "jot or tittle" scorned. The regulations of the Old Law were exacting on this night, for it is the eve of the Passover. The central figure on this occasion is the Paschal Lamb, clearest of all the types of Christ. The similarities are striking: the lamb to be slain was to be without blemish; it was to be offered to God and then eaten; not a bone of it was to be broken. Moreover, the lamb is remarkable for its gentleness; it suffers without complaint. God, Who gives to the most humble the highest of places, has made the most meek of animals a figure of the Son of the Most High, Him Who is the "Lamb of God."¹⁰ The overture of the Old Law has swelled into the symphony of the New, but the figure of the lamb, like a lovely leitmotif in that symphony, becomes the more unforgettable from its soft and constant repetition.

The "Lamb of God" is also the shepherd of men. Christ had spent the whole time of His public ministry as a Divine Shepherd leading His flock to the sheep-fold of true happiness. At the Last Supper He must have had a feeling of poignancy as He looked upon those to whom He would give an intimacy only God can give—the gift of Himself. Incredible as it seems, they would respond to His promise of eternal presence by fleeing from His side only a few short hours later. He had offered to man the way to eternal glory; He received from man the Way of the Cross.

"Verbum caro, panem verum
Verbo carnem efficit,
Fitque sanguis Christi merum,
Et si sensus deficit,
Ad firmandum cor sincerum
Sola fides sufficit."

Translation: *"The Word-made-Flesh changes by His word true bread into His Flesh; and wine becomes the Blood of Christ; and if the intellect does not grasp this, faith alone suffices to make sure the sincere heart."*

¹⁰ John 1, 29.

This stanza in the Latin is one of the most famous in sacred poetry. No English version has been equal to its precision in words and its compression in thought. As soon as our eye strikes it, we are carried back to the tremendous opening of the Gospel according to St. John. The Word Who was with God and Who became flesh is going to dwell with us forever. The Last Supper is an Eternal Banquet; that First Consecration of the bread and wine pronounced by Christ re-echoes throughout all time on the lips of the "other Christs." One would think that all men would welcome this pledge of love, that they could have no doubt of the crystal-clear words of Christ. We know the Eucharist is a mystery of faith, and we do not expect to comprehend it. Some, like so many modern Adams, do not like that feeling of frail finity. They attempt to explain away the words of Christ under the guise of making clear what God *meant* to say! We know that Christ said what he meant to say. We know that the Church which Christ founded solemnly states: "... after the consecration of bread and wine, our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man, is truly, really and substantially contained in the august sacrament of the Holy Eucharist under the appearance of those sensible things." How can this be? Are we not sure that Our Lord's body is in heaven? Is it not a contradiction, then, to hold that He is present in those consecrated hosts on earth? The Council of Trent clears these doubts: "... there is no repugnance in this that our Savior sits always at the right hand of the Father in heaven according to the natural mode of existing, and yet is in many other places sacramentally present to us in His own substance by a manner of existence which, though we can scarcely express in words, yet with our understanding illumined by faith, we can conceive and ought most firmly to believe is possible to God."¹¹ We have our choice: the verbose negation of men or the silent assent of faith, the empty tabernacle or Emmanuel.¹²

"Tantum ergo Sacramentum
Veneremur cernui:
Et antiquum documentum
Novo cedat ritui:
Praestet fides supplementum
Sensuum defectui."

Translation: "*Let us, therefore, prostrate, adore so great a Sacrament; and let the Old Law give way to the New Law: let faith supplement the weakness of the senses.*"

¹¹ SCHROEDER, O.P., H. J. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, p. 73. Herder Book Co., St. Louis, Mo., 1941.

¹² "... Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us." Mt. 1, 23.

The Jews of the Old Testament bowed in fear when God made His presence known. We know the Son of God is present in the Blessed Sacrament and we bow in love. The theme of the symphony of the New Testament is love. The whole of the law and the prophets is contained in the two commandments of love—love of God and love of neighbor. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of love. Through the Eucharist we are united to Him Whom we love and through Him to our neighbor. Thus is the Eucharist the "Sacrament of the Community," for through it comes this Christian union. The individual personality does not suffer by this union, for each one has his own unique relationship to Christ. It is a faint shadowing of that perfect unity of God in Whom there is the real distinction of the Persons of the Trinity. Having this union, no Christian need feel the chill of loneliness nor need he feel his personal dignity invaded. He shares in this indescribable community of love, and yet he still retains the splendid isolation of personal communion with God. He has God to thank for this very union of charity. Life becomes less complex, and the vagueness of indetermination vanishes when we realize how truly God is the Alpha and Omega, how intimately present He is to the true Christian soul. We see the agnostic aimlessly stumbling in a circle of bewilderment. We who know that we are made by God for God likewise journey in a circle, but a circle of love.

"Genitori Genitoque
 Laus et jubilatio,
 Salus, honor, virtusquoque
 Sit et benedictio:
 Procedenti ab utroque
 Compar sit laudatio."

* Translation: *"To the Father, and to the Son be praise, glory, salvation, honor, power and benediction also! And to Him proceeding from them Both be equal praise."*

"Thou art worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory, and honor, and power."¹³ Particularly fitting is this lilt of praise to the Triune God. God the Father sent the Divine Giver of the Wondrous Gift, the Eucharist, into the world. The guidance and inspiration of the Holy Ghost for all time are promised by Christ to His Mystical Body, the Church. The Mystical Body is nourished in the Eucharist which is the food of souls and the light and strength of the faithful.

¹³ Apoc. 4, 11.

Members of that Mystical Body who are worthy recipients of the Eucharist receive an increase in grace, and grace is the seed of eternal glory. Our eternal glory centers on the Beatific Vision, the vision of the Triune God. Thus is the circle of love completed. God has first loved us, and He draws our love to Himself. Our happiness would not be perfect unless it ended in the inexpressible vision of Subsistent Happiness. The true Christian realizes the truth of those words, "... we have not here a lasting city . . ." ¹⁴ With St. Thomas, he answers the question of Christ, "What do you ask?"

"Thyself alone, dear Lord,
Thee, only Thee;
Naught in this world beside
Delighteth me."

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"Greatest of gifts, dear Lord,
Thyself bestow;
Then to Thy Courts above,
Lord, bid me go." ¹⁵

¹⁴ Heb. 13, 14.

¹⁵ MABEL SEATON. *Passion Flowers and Other Poems*. Sands & Co., London, 1927. The quotation is from the poem "Give Me Thyself."