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TO SING A CHRISTMAS SONG

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DO BEGIN WITH, MARLEY IS DEAD. Dead as a door-nail. Marley and Scrooge, Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, dead, or at least relatively so. For a Dickens Christmas is only half a Christmas; it cannot bring life to a Christian world. There is no Christ Mass without Christ; there is no Christmas literature worthy of the name that does not have His spirit in it.

Real Christmas literature, especially poetry, abounds in the English tongue. There is scarcely a poet who has not at one time or another written with Blessed Robert Southwell, S.J.:

"And straight I calléd unto mind that it was Christmas day."

One of the first poems recorded in our language is the ballad sung by Caedmon after his apparition, a poem of the Nativity. Down through the years of English literature, until the Reformation, it was a theme that caught the fancy of all the poets, this simple story of a maid, her son, and a little town, these astounding truths of a God made man, a virgin become a mother. In the 11th century, soon after England received the Faith, someone wrote:

*Jesu, sweet, be not wroth
I have neither clout nor cloth
Thee in for to fold;
I have, but a clout of a lappe,
Therefore lay thy feet to my pappe
And keep thee from the cold.*

Even in this early period the list of carols and poems was extensive. Later, in the early fifteenth century, from among the many carols that have come to us :¹

*All this worlde was forelore,
Eva Peccatrice
Till that Jesu was ybore
De te, Genetrice*

Of later fifteenth century carols, one to our Lady, "perhaps the most perfect little lyric in the English language" has the lines :

*He came all so still
Where His Mother was,
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass*

*He came all so still
Where His Mother lay
As dew in April
That falleth on the spray.*

The number of these poems increased as time passed until a Catholic, as all Englishmen were then, wrote a poem which was popular just before the reign of Henry VIII. It has survived those days, and we sing it today, sometimes unmindful of the meaning of the words :

*God rest you merry, gentlemen,
Let nothing you dismay
For Jesus, Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day,
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray
O tidings of comfort and joy,
For Jesus Christ our Saviour was born
on Christmas Day!*

Even through the Reformation, though with much less life and vigor, Catholic poets kept the theme in their lines. Crashaw, Dryden, Blessed Robert Southwell, S.J., and Fr. Faber are a few, and they persevered until our time when there is not one who has not in some verse or another touched the Nativity story with the gold that flows

¹ *Ancient English Christmas Carols* MCCCC to MDCC arranged by Edith Rickert, Duffield and Co. New York, 1910.

from a poet's pen. The greatest modern, whose mind and soul were as English and Catholic as the earliest centuries, G. K. Chesterton, wrote in his "Christmas Carol":²

*The Christ-child lay on Mary's lap,
His hair was like a light.
(Oh weary, weary were the world,
But here is all aright.) . . .*

*The Christ-child stood at Mary's knee,
His hair was like a Crown,
And all the flowers looked up at Him
And all the stars looked down.*

English is laden with Christmas poems, and all of them in some way bearing Christ. One does not have far to look to find one.

There is a very fundamental reason for the variety and number of Nativity poems in the English language, or in any language, for that matter. Christmas for Catholics means two things: a mystery and a story, a dogma and an event. Christmas is the feast of the Incarnation, of the God made man. It is the feast of the Virgin-birth, the feast of the divine maternity of the Blessed Mother. These are the Christmas dogmas stated in the Credo of the Christmas Mass:

(I believe) . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten son of God, born of the Father before all ages; God of God, light of light, true God of true God; begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father; by Whom all things were made. Who for us men and our salvation, came down from heaven; and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, of the Virgin Mary; and was made man.

But Christmas is also a story. It is the remembrance of things past, the story of a virgin who was to be a mother, of a carpenter, a census-taking, the birth of a baby. It is the story of shepherds and kings and angels. It is something that took place on earth in a place we know. It is a story that has been told in many ways.

Once, a tradition tells us, it was told by the Mother of God to St. Luke who wrote her words in the first chapters of his gospel. These might have been her words, in part:

² *The Man Who Was Chesterton*, Dodd, Mead and Co. New York, 1937 p. 587.

... and Joseph, being of David's clan and family, came up from the town of Nazareth, in Galilee, to David's city in Judaea, the city called Bethlehem, to give in his name there. With him was I, his espoused wife Mary, who was then in my pregnancy; and it was while we were still there that the time came for my delivery. I brought forth a son, my first-born, whom I wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger, because there was no room for us in the inn.³

About Christmas then we have two things, the mystery which is truth (the article in the creed is its most accurate formulation, in words which must be meditated and thought upon for years before the truth can be realized), and a story, a tale of people and events, sensible happenings, a simple story which once heard can never be forgotten. It is for this reason that in the Christmas liturgy, the Gospels of the first and second Masses are taken from that of St. Luke, which is richest in the images and the story, and in the third Mass from that of St. John which is richest in the dogma.

Now it is the fashion of Catholic poets, when writing of God, to do one of two things. One is to express a reality, an image as seen in the faith, in a way that will arouse poetic delight and joy in this image, the delight coming from the understanding of the image in the light of some doctrine of the faith. This is the more common mode, and poems of this kind are religious poems in the strict sense. This art-form is exemplified in many poems, particularly in Christmas poems. Chesterton wrote once of a donkey:⁴

... The tattered outlaw of the earth,
Of ancient crooked will;
Starve, scourge, deride me: I am dumb
I keep my secret still.

Fools! For I also had my hour;
One far fierce hour and sweet:
There was a shout about my ears,
And palms before my feet.

In the stanzas of the poem which are omitted here, the poet

³ Adapted from The New Testament in English, translated by Ronald A. Knox, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1944, a new modern translation of the Vulgate Latin text.

⁴ *ibid.* p. 573.

paints the donkey as an inferior ugly beast, derided, of monstrous head and large ears,

*The devil's walking parody
On all four-footed things.*

The image is clearly that of a donkey, and, viewed as a donkey, the poet can see in him only the object of derision, the summation of ugliness. But seen in the light of the faith the donkey becomes changed and the image is now a source of special delight and exhilaration to the listener. It was the donkey on which Christ rode into Jerusalem.

A Christmas poem will also illustrate this, the fifteenth century Carol to Our Lady:

*He came all so still
Where His mother was,
As dew in April
That falleth on the grass.*

Taken in itself this is commonplace verse, it signifies nothing. But understood in the light of belief in the divine maternity of Mary at Bethlehem it becomes a new cause of delight and joy.

The like is done in many poems, many of far greater intensity than those cited here. Perhaps the most perfect examples of it are the poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., especially "The Windhover," "God's Grandeur" and "Spring and Fall."

In the other mode of poetry under the faith, the aim of the poet is to use the image as a symbol and by it to provide a means of causing delight in some truth known in the faith which is difficult of comprehension or realization. The intention of the poet here is not to teach a speculative doctrine as would be the intention of a theologian who might use the same image as an example. It is more practical than that. The poet seeks to cause in so far as it is possible, that is, by way of a disposition, through the image, an act of faith, hope or charity in the listener. But here as in the first class, what is known first is the image. Then by means of the comparison the poet leads the listener, through his faith, to the realization of some truth in God. Among Christmas poems there are many of this class. All hymns have this intention as their end. Thus the Christmas Hymn of St. Ephraem the Syrian reads in part:

*Mary now for us becometh
As the heavens where God abideth;
For His everlasting Godhead*

*Deigns to make in her dwelling;
 Made a little Child to lift us,
 While His nature never changeth;
 In her womb the robe He weaveth
 Clad in which He comes to save us;
 Wonder that no tongue can utter,
 See, her Son the Virgin beareth!*

This movement from an image to God, from a sensible image to the realization of some truth in God is most clearly seen in the Sequence of the Mass of Christmas Day, as it is in the Dominican Missal, the *Laetabundus*, the fourth verse of which reads:

*Lebanon's high cedar tree
 Gently o'er the hyssops bends
 In the dell.
 Word made flesh, high majesty
 To our lowly form descends:
 Emmanuel.*

In the first mode of Catholic poems above, the delight is in the image; in the second it is in God. In one case the faith is an instrument to a poetic understanding of the image; in the second case the image is a means of understanding and realizing something in the faith. In both cases the faith is presupposed. In religious poems the delight is in nature because we know something about it through the faith; in sacred poems we delight in God because we see His image in some natural or imaginative sensible fact.

Christmas poets write in both these modes. The dogmas in their poems are the great truths of Christmas: the Incarnation, the Virgin birth and the divine maternity of the Blessed Virgin. Most often the image is the same, the Bethlehem scene, the crib, the baby, the oxen, St. Joseph, angels, shepherds and kings. From these simple elements most of our Christmas poetry and song has grown.

One further fact however makes the analysis of Christmas poems a little more complex; the story of the birth and the happenings at Bethlehem is an object of faith. Thus it is a matter of God's truth that Christ was born in a stable, that He was a Child, that there were shepherds, and Magi who came to adore. We believe not only the great truths, we believe also in the event.

This fact then makes possible a new class of Christmas poems in which the image used in the poem is not the Christmas scene or any part of it but some other representation or form taken from nature or

from the poet's imagination. This image is then given a new meaning and intelligibility in the light of the Christmas story. The poet causes a new poetic delight in it as it is seen in its relation to Bethlehem. A poem, "Midnight Mass" illustrates this:⁵

*Boy shepherds guide the populace
To cave no more bedight;
Their own rough mountain garb gives place
To cassocks snowy white.*

In this poem, to which there are many more verses, the solemnity of Midnight Mass is compared to the Nativity scene, and thus the poet finds a special delight in this annual Christmas celebration.

Christmas poems then are composed of some combination of two of these three elements: the great dogmas, the Nativity story, some other image chosen by the poet. These three, understood in connection with the two-fold mode of all Christmas poems, makes possible six classes of Christmas poems. And these six combinations sum up all Christmas types.

Poems combining the first and second elements are the most common. Chesterton's "Christmas Carol" has been cited as a religious poem, and the *Laetabundus* as a sacred poem. The intention in the sacred mode is to use the Nativity story as a symbol for leading men to a realization and delight in one of the great truths of Christmas. The religious mode uses one of the great truths as a means of increasing poetic delight in the Bethlehem image. Another example of this mode is this fragment of Blessed Robert Southwell, S.J.:

*Behold ye little tender Babe
In freezing winter night,
In homely manger trembling lies;
Alas, a piteous sight!*

*The inns are full, no man will yield
This little pilgrim bed;
But forced is He with silly beasts
In crib to shroud His head.*

⁵ Benjamin Musser: Poems 1930-1933, Caxton Printers. Caldwell, Id., 1933.

*Despise Him not for lying there,
First what He is inquire
An orient pearl is often found
In depths of dirty mire.*

This is an ancient carol, but an example of the best in the language. Set to music, as it probably was, it is a masterpiece of Christmas song.

Poems combining the second and third elements are more rare, though common. The intention here is similar to those poems above. The sacred mode seeks to lead us to a realization of the Christmas story, which we know by faith, through an image not of the Bethlehem story. One of the most famous in this mode is "The Burning Babe" of Blessed Robert, which ends with the line:

"And straight I calléd unto mind that it was Christmas day."

The religious mode seeks delight in an image not of the Bethlehem tale by viewing it in the light of belief in the Christmas story. Sister Madeleva wrote a poem of Dominican interest, "Dumb Oxen":⁶

*Mary, pray for Paris
And Bethlehem;
A dumb ox served you
In both of them.*

Here the principal image is that of St. Thomas (The Dumb Ox of Aquino) teaching theology in Paris. But this image is given a special beauty and meaning understood in the light of the Christmas scene, at which also dumb oxen were present.

Poems combining the first and third elements, the great dogmas and some arbitrary image not of the Christmas story, since they contain no reference to the Bethlehem scene, are commonly not recognized as Christmas poems. Men are human, and children at heart, and for most of us the whole of Christmas, as far as the religious aspect of it goes, is bound up with the old, old story that begins with the announcement of a decree that went out from Caesar Augustus.

Yet there is something strange about this. For while in religious poetry we recognize nothing as a Christmas poem unless it bears the stamp of the Christ-child and His Mother and the town of Bethlehem, in other matters of Christmas this is the one aspect which is

⁶ Selected Poems, Macmillan. New York, 1939.

least thought of. It is true of Catholics, it seems, as of the society in which they live that:

*. . . though maybe not one tenth the town
Knows what boon this day has brought us down,
We go on keeping Christmas just the same
With tinsel tricks, pretenses and a name . . .*

*And having soared in sales of Christmas cards
Inscribed with Christ-less rhymes by Christ-less bards,
Proprietor Mazuma sends the season's
Best greetings round to all for Christ-less reasons.*

in the words of Fr. Leonard Feeney's Christmas poem "And Still."

But this need not be true in literature, nor in cards, nor gifts, nor feasts, nor song. There is an abundance of Christmas literature, especially poetry and song, that is Catholic and does not forget the one central fact of Christmas, that Christ was born in a stable, that He is God. It is just this abundance of literature that makes it possible for Catholics to turn more and more to the stores of literature which have sprung from the faith, and turn more and more away from the literature which has sprung up outside the faith, and is dangerous to the faith because of what it leaves out.

The Gospel story of the Nativity and of the Epiphany and the myriads of legends which have grown up in Christian minds about these two events are the real food for Christian souls, so long undernourished on Scrooge and Marley, Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim, no matter how appealing this writing may be in itself. The Christmas poems and songs written in the early ages of the Faith in England, and in our day by Englishmen and Americans alike, are a source of Christian joy and faith and love, and of real value to men, as men and as sons of God. May these Catholic songs take a place in Catholic hearts so that soon our Christmas song will be more:

*God rest you merry, gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
For Jesus Christ our Saviour
Was born upon this day,
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray.*

and a hundred others like it, and less:

Merry Christmas to all, to all a goodnight!