

## LATIN HYMNODY

Cletus Murphy, '45

Among the early Christians the word hymn, from the Latin word, *hymnus*, a Christian derivative, had a wider and different meaning from that which we attach to it today. To these early Christians a hymn was a song in praise of God or His saints. It was a general term for the psalms, Biblical canticles, and all other songs of praise to God, either in prose or rythmical language. This is all very much opposed to our idea of hymns; at least we conceive them as being made up of a symmetrical arrangement of stanzas with or without rhyme.

Our Latin hymnody had its beginning about the middle of the fourth century when hymns were sung by Christian congregations to counteract the activity of heretics, chiefly the Arians of the time. Here we observe the necessity for a departure from the rules of pagan Latin poetry-writing. Christianity was not, at first, the religion of courts and palaces. Hymnody was the poetry of the people. Hence, the rythmical or accentual principle which regarded the natural accent of the word was gradually adopted in place of the classical quantitative principle which regarded rather the length of the syllable and which only the learned could appreciate. Thus, the language of ordinary life was the medium of Christian teaching whether in the form of hymns or homilies, and it differed in phraseology from the compositions of court poets. We may always bear in mind the differences between pagan Latin poetry and Latin Christian hymnody. The former, as classic achievement, serves to cultivate a delicate and refined taste; the latter enkindles in the soul the loftiest sentiments of religion. Never was the latter needed more than in time of heresy. The psalms and hymns used in the sublime functions of our religion fashion religious sentiment and give a character to the piety which is cherished. Latin scholars ridicule the manner in which the style of heathen poetry was overthrown, but this step was necessary. It was impossible that the early Christians should be content to use in the service of God the meter or tunes, profaned by the heathen poets, which could only remind them of the worst features of the heathenism they had forsaken. We may compare this practice to the singing of the psalms to



some profane ditty taken from the theatre. Had the hymn-writers appreciated the power of poetry sung to music, they would have abandoned entirely the old meters from the beginning.

Again, the cold, lifeless form of heathen poetry was powerless to stir the heart to its depths and to elevate the soul. Authors could not adapt the sacred truths of faith to that series of elaborately measured syllables which make up and body of Latin poetry. The hymn-writer had numerous themes, such as his ideas of heaven, the ravages of sin, and the exploits and heroic sufferings of the great servants of God. What is so moving to the soul as the toils, suffering, the triumph of the Redeemer with the promised glorious results of His mediation? Poetry was made the medium of expression of love, thanksgiving, and Christian piety. The old Latin poetry style could never suit such themes.

A translation of Latin hymns shows the power with which they compress grand ideas into single phrases, wrapping up into condensed expressions thoughts which theologians would expand into volumes. It is only in this way that many great truths of our Holy Faith can react upon our hearts with any real force.

As examples of some of the greatest Latin hymns we may remark on a few of the Sequences. The pathos and feeling expressed by the *Stabat Mater* should lay a powerful hold upon the reader or hearer and make him realize the pang which seized the heart of Mary. The noble hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas, entitled *Lauda Sion*, teaches with the loftiest sentiments the central doctrine of our religion, Christ present in the Blessed Eucharist. The unequalled hymn is the *Dies Irae*. It presents a grand and awful picture of the final judgement. It brings in upon our souls the meaning of the last things. Dr. Schaff has said: "This marvellous hymn is the masterpiece of Latin poetry and the most sublime of all hymns; the secret of its irresistible power lies in the grandeur of the theme and the pathos of the poet." The author was inspired by imaginations of the final crash of the universe, the angels' trumpets summoning the dead, the King of tremendous majesty on the throne of justice and mercy. These are the thoughts which the author wished to arouse in those who sing or hear the beautiful composition.

We have mentioned already that Latin hymnody had its beginning about the middle of the fourth century. St.



Ambrose was its originator in the West when he wrote hymns in an attempt to counteract the Arian doctrines. He wrote in a meter easily understood and easily memorized by all classes. At least twelve of our greatest hymns are Ambrosian. For the next four centuries hymn-writers imitated St. Ambrose.

The second period, that is, between the ninth and sixteenth centuries, was the richest in hymnology. Popular subjects of the period were the Passion and Wounds of Christ, the joys of paradise, the terrors of judgement, and hymns in honour of our Blessed Lady and the saints. This period embraced the entire Middle Ages, during which the Church was glorified throughout Europe.

This second period was followed by one of decline. With the close of the Ages of the Faith the splendour of Latin hymnody declined. Hymn-writing became a lost art. During former ages men thought in Latin; it was the language of the Church and it was capable of giving expression to the most refined thoughts and feelings of the human soul. Men gloried in the Faith and aimed at expression of it in literature, as in painting and sculpture. A second cause of decline was the Renaissance. The humanist looked upon any form of Latin except the ancient classical as a barbarism. He viewed with disdain the rythmical poetry of the Middle Ages. Urban VIII, the last humanist pope, ordered a revision of the Breviary. Accordingly, four Jesuit scholars altered in part or changed completely most of the hymns of the Breviary to suit humanist and classical ideals of Latin poetry. The hymns, however, in the old forms are still found in the Breviaries of the Benedictines, Dominicans, and others.



He that cannot think, is a fool  
He that will not, is a bigot,  
He that dare not, is a slave.

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Count that day lost whose low descending sun  
Views from the hand no worthy action done.

—*Jacob Bobart.*