

## THE RISE OF LATIN HYMNODY

### *An Ambrosian Advent Hymn*

*Come, Thou Saviour of our race,  
Choicest Gift of heavenly grace!  
O Thou blessed Virgin's Son,  
Be Thy race on earth begun.*

*Not of mortal blood or birth,  
He descends from heaven to earth:  
By the Holy Ghost conceived,  
God and man by us believed.*

*Wondrous birth! O wondrous child  
Of the virgin undefiled!  
Though by all the world disowned,  
Still to be in heaven enthroned.*

*From the Father forth He came,  
And returneth to the same;  
Captive leading death and hell –  
High the song of triumph swell!*

*Equal to the Father now,  
Though to dust Thou once didst bow,  
Boundless shall Thy kingdom be;  
When shall we its glories see?*

*Brightly doth Thy manger shine!  
Glorious in its light divine:  
Let not sin o'ercloud this light,  
Ever be our faith thus bright.*

AURELIUS AMBROSE (340-397 A.D.)

The first hymns and canticles used in the Western churches came from the East. They were sung in their original Greek form. It was not until the beginning of the fourth century that any record of Latin hymns is found. Isadore of Seville, who died in the year 636 A.D., tells us that "Hilary of Gaul, bishop of Poitiers, was the first who flourished in composing hymns in verse." Hilary, who died in the year 368, himself records the fact that he brought some of them from the East. His most famous Latin hymn is *Lucis largitor splendide*.

The father of Latin hymnody, however, was the great church father, Aurelius Ambrose, bishop of Milan. It was he who taught the Western Church to glorify God in song. Concerning this remarkable bishop, Mabillon writes:

"St. Ambrose took care that, after the manner of the Eastern Fathers, psalms and hymns should be sung by the people also, when previously they had only been recited by individuals singly, and among the Italians by clerks only."

The father of Ambrose was prefect of the Gauls, and it is believed that the future bishop was born at Treves about 340 A.D. The youthful Ambrose, like his father, was trained for government service, and in 374 A.D. he was appointed Consular of Liguria and Aemilia. During the election of a bishop in Milan, a bitter conflict raged between the orthodox Christians and the Arians, and Ambrose found it necessary to attend the church where the election was taking place in order to calm the excited assembly.

According to tradition, a child's voice was heard to cry out in the church, "Ambrosius!" This was accepted at once by the multitude as an act of divine guidance and the whole assembly began shouting, "Ambrose shall be our bishop!" Ambrose had been attracted to the Christian religion but as yet had not received baptism. He therefore protested his election and immediately fled from the city. He was induced to return, however, was baptized, and accepted the high office for which he had been chosen.

The story of his subsequent life is one of the most remarkable chapters in the annals of the early Christian Church. Selling all his possessions, he entered upon the duties of his bishopric with such fervent zeal and untiring devotion that his fame spread far and wide. He early recognized the value of music in church worship and immediately took steps to introduce congregational singing. He was the author of a new kind of church music, which, because of its rhythmical accent, rich modulation, and musical flow, made a powerful appeal to the emotions. Withal, because it was combined with such artless simplicity, it was easily mastered by the common people and instantly sprang into great popularity. By the introduction of responsive singing he also succeeded in securing the active participation of the congregation in the worship.

Empress Justina favored the Arians and sought to induce Ambrose to open the church of Milan for their use. When Ambrose replied with dignity that it did not behoove the state to interfere in matters of doctrine, soldiers were sent to enforce the imperial will. The people of Milan, however, rallied around their beloved bishop, and, when the soldiers surrounded the church, Ambrose and his congregation were singing and praying. So tremendous was the effect of the song that the soldiers outside the church finally joined in the anthems. The effort to compel Ambrose to yield proved fruitless, and the empress abandoned her plan.

Augustine, who later became the most famous convert of Ambrose, tells of the great

impression made on his soul when he heard the singing of Ambrose and his congregation. In his "Confessions" he writes: "How mightily I was moved by the overwhelming tones of Thy Church, my God! Thy voices flooded my ears, Thy truth melted my heart, the sacred fires of worship were kindled in my soul, my tears flowed, and a foretaste of the joy of salvation was given me." Ambrose himself has left us this testimony: "They say that people are transported by the singing of my hymns, and I confess that it is true."

Ambrose was no respecter of persons. Although he was a warm friend of the Emperor Theodosius, he denounced the latter's cruel massacre of the people of Thessalonica, and, when Theodosius came to the church of Ambrose to worship, he was met at the door by the brave bishop and denied admittance.

"Do you," he cried, "who have been guilty of shedding innocent blood, dare to enter the sanctuary?"

The emperor for eight months refrained from communion; then he applied for absolution, which was granted him after he had done public penance. He also promised in the future never to execute a death sentence within thirty days of its pronouncement.

It was at Milan that the pious Monica experienced the joy of seeing her tears and prayers answered in the conversion of her famous son, Augustine. The latter, who had come to Milan in the year 384 as a teacher of oratory, was attracted at first by the eloquence of Ambrose's preaching. It was not long, however, before the Word of God began to grip the heart of the skeptical, sensual youth. At length he was induced to begin anew the study of the Scripture, and his conversion followed. It was on Easter Sunday, 387 A.D., that he received the rite of holy baptism at the hands of Bishop Ambrose. There is a beautiful tradition that the *Te Deum Laudamus* was composed under inspiration and recited alternately by Ambrose and Augustine immediately after the latter had been baptized. However, there is little to substantiate this legend, and it is more likely that the magnificent hymn of praise was a compilation of a later date, based on a very ancient Greek version.

As Athanasius was the defender of the doctrine of the Trinity in the East, so Ambrose was its champion in the West. It is natural, therefore, that many of the hymns of Ambrose center around the deity of Christ. There are at least twelve Latin hymns that can be ascribed with certainty to him. Perhaps his best hymn is *Veni, Redemptor gentium*, which Luther prized very highly and which was one of the first he translated into German. The English translation, "Come, Thou Saviour of our race," is by William R. Reynolds. Another Advent hymn, "Now hail we our Redeemer," is sometimes ascribed to Ambrose.

The beloved bishop, whose life had been so stormy, passed peacefully to rest on Easter evening, 397 A.D. Thus was seemingly granted beautiful fulfilment to the prayer Ambrose utters in one of his hymns:

Grant to life's day a calm unclouded ending,  
An eve untouched by shadows of decay,  
The brightness of a holy deathbed blending  
With dawning glories of the eternal day.

While Ambrose was defending the faith and inditing sacred songs at Milan, another richly-endowed poet was writing sublime Latin verse far to the West. He was Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, the great Spanish hymnist. Of his personal history we know little except that he was born 348 A.D. in northern Spain, probably at Saragossa.

In early life he occupied important positions of state, but in his latter years he retired to a monastery. Here he exercised his high poetic gifts in writing a series of sacred Latin poems. He was preeminently the poet of the martyrs, never ceasing to extol their Christian faith and fortitude. Bentley called Prudentius the "Horace of the Christians." Rudelbach declared that his poetry "is like gold set with precious stones," and Luther expressed the desire that the works of Prudentius should be studied in the schools.

The finest funeral hymn ever written has come to us from the pen of this early Spanish bard. It consists of forty-four verses, and begins with the line, *Deus ignee fons animarum*. It is sometimes referred to as the "song of the catacombs." Archbishop Trenchard of England called this hymn "the crowning glory of the poetry of Prudentius," and another archbishop, Johan Olof Wallin, the great hymnist of Sweden, made four different attempts at translating it before he produced the hymn now regarded as one of the choicest gems in the "Psalm-book" of his native land.

An English version, derived from the longer poem, begins with the stanza:

Despair not, O heart, in thy sorrow,  
But hope from God's promises borrow;  
Beware, in thy sorrow, of sinning,  
For death is of life the beginning.