

THE GOLDEN AGE OF LATIN HYMNODY

A Tribute to the Dying Saviour

*O sacred Head, now wounded,
With grief and shame weighed down,
Now scornfully surrounded,
With thorns Thine only crown!
Once reigning in the highest
In light and majesty,
Dishonored now Thou diest,
Yet here I worship Thee.*

*How art Thou pale with anguish,
With sore abuse and scorn!
How does that visage languish,
Which once was bright as morn!
What Thou, my Lord, hast suffered,
Was all for sinners' gain;
Mine, mine was the transgression,
But Thine the deadly pain.*

*Lo, here I fall, my Saviour,
'Tis I deserve Thy place:
Look on me with Thy favor,
Vouchsafe to me Thy grace.
Receive me, my Redeemer;
My Shepherd, make me Thine,
Of every good the Fountain,
Thou art the Spring of mine!*

*What language shall I borrow
To thank Thee, dearest Friend,
For this, Thy dying sorrow,
Thy pity without end!
O make me Thine forever,
And should I fainting be,
Lord, let me never, never,
Outlive my love to Thee.*

BERARD OF CLAIRVAUX (1091-1153 A.D.)

During the Middle Ages, when evil days had fallen upon the Church, there was very little to inspire sacred song. All over Europe the Gregorian chants, sung in Latin, had crowded out congregational singing. The barbarian languages were considered too crude for use in worship, and much less were they regarded as worthy of being moulded into Christian hymns. Religious poetry was almost invariably written in Latin.

However, in the midst of the spiritual decay and worldly depravity that characterized the age there were noble souls whose lives shone like bright stars in the surrounding darkness. Their sacred poetry, a great deal of which was written for private devotion, bears witness of their deep love for the Saviour.

The beautiful Palm Sunday hymn, "All glory, laud, and honor," was composed by Bishop Theodulph of Orleans in a prison cell, probably in the year 821. The immortal *Veni, Creator Spiritus* also dates from the same period, being usually ascribed to Rhabanus Maurus, archbishop of Mainz, who died in the year 856.

The religious fervor inspired by the Crusades, which began in the year 1098, resulted in the production during the twelfth century of Latin poetry of singular lyrical beauty. This may be regarded as the golden age of Latin hymnody.

It was during this period that the most touching of all Good Friday hymns, "O sacred Head, now wounded," was written. It is ascribed to Bernard of Clairvaux, preacher of the Second Crusade, and one of the most brilliant of Latin hymn-writers.

Although composed in the twelfth century, the hymn did not achieve unusual fame until five centuries later, when it was rendered into German by the greatest of all Lutheran hymnists, Paul Gerhardt. Lauxmann has well said: "Bernard's original is powerful and searching, but Gerhardt's hymn is still more powerful and profound, as redrawn from the deeper spring of evangelical Lutheran, Scriptural knowledge and fervency of faith."

Gerhardt's version in turn was translated into English by James W. Alexander of Princeton, a Presbyterian. Thus, as Dr. Philip Schaff puts it: "This classic hymn has shown in three tongues -- Latin, German and English -- and in three confessions -- Roman, Lutheran and Reformed -- with equal effect the dying love of our Saviour and our boundless indebtedness to Him."

Yet another Lutheran, none other than John Sebastian Bach, "high priest of church music," has contributed to the fame of the hymn by giving the gripping tune to which it is sung its present form. Strangely enough, this remarkable minor melody was originally a rather frivolous German folksong, and was adapted by Hans Leo Hassler in 1601 to the hymn, "Herzlich thut mich verlangen." It was Bach, however, who moulded the tune into the "Passion Chorale," one of the world's masterpieces of sacred music.

Many touching stories have been recorded concerning this famous hymn. In 1798, when

Christian Schwartz, the great Lutheran missionary to India, lay dying, his Indian pupils gathered around his bed and sang in their own Malabar tongue the last verses of the hymn, Schwartz himself joining in the singing till his voice was silenced in death.

Of Bernard of Clairvaux, the writer of the hymn, volumes might be written. Luther paid him an eloquent tribute, when he said: "If there has ever been a pious monk who feared God it was St. Bernard, whom alone I hold in much higher esteem than all other monks and priests throughout the globe."

Probably no preacher ever exerted a more profound influence over the age in which he lived than did this Cistercian monk. It was the death of his mother, when he was twenty years old, that seemed to have been the turning point in his life. The son of a Burgundian knight, he had planned to become a priest, but now he determined to enter a monastery. He did not go alone, however, but took with him twelve companions, including an uncle and four of his five brothers!

When he was only twenty-four years old, in the year 1115, he founded a monastery of his own, which was destined to become one of the most famous in history. It was situated in a valley in France called Wormwood, a wild region famous as a robber haunt. Bernard changed the name to "Clara Vallis," or "Beautiful Valley," from which is derived the designation "Clairvaux."

Among his pupils were men who afterwards wielded great influence in the Roman Church. One became a pope, six became cardinals, and thirty were elevated to the office of bishop in the church.

As abbot of Clairvaux, the fame of Bernard spread through all Christendom. He led such an ascetic life that he was reduced almost to a living skeleton. His haggard appearance alone made a deep impression on his audiences. But he also was gifted with extraordinary eloquence and deep spiritual fervor.

Frequently he would leave his monastery to appear before kings and church councils, always swaying them at will. During the year 1146 he traveled through France and Germany, preaching a second crusade. The effect of his preaching was almost miraculous. In some instances the whole population of cities and villages seemed to rise *en masse*, flocking to the crusade standards.

"In the towns where I have preached," he said, "scarcely one man is left to seven women."

Emperor Conrad and Louis, King of France, were easily won to the cause, and in 1147 the vast horde of crusaders started for the Holy Land. Probably only one-tenth reached Palestine, and the expedition resulted in failure. A miserable remnant returned home, defeated and disgraced. The blame was thrown on Bernard and it was no doubt this sorrow that hastened his death, in the year 1153.

His noble Good Friday hymn, which in Latin begins with the words, *Salve caput cruentatum*, alone would have gained undying fame for Bernard, but we are indebted to this gifted monk for another remarkable poem, *De Nomine Jesu*, from which at least three of our most beautiful English hymns have been derived. One of these is a translation by the Englishman, Edward Caswall:

Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills my breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see
And in Thy presence rest.

A second by the same translator is equally beautiful:

O Jesus! King most wonderful,
Thou Conqueror renowned,
Thou sweetness most ineffable,
In whom all joys are found.

The third derived from Bernard's Latin lyric is by the American hymnist, Ray Palmer

O Jesus, joy of loving hearts!
Thou Fount of life! Thou Light of men!
From fullest bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.

Throughout the Middle Ages the verses of Bernard were a source of inspiration to faithful souls, and it is said that even the Crusaders who kept guard over the holy sepulchre at Jerusalem sang his *De Nomine Jesu*.

A noted contemporary, Bernard of Cluny, shares with Bernard of Clairvaux the distinction of occupying the fore most place among the great Latin hymn-writers. This Bernard was born in Morlaix in Brittany of English parents very early in the twelfth century. After having entered the Abbey of Cluny, which at that time was the most wealthy and luxurious monastery in Europe, he devoted his leisure hours to writing his famous poem, *De contemptu mundi*. This poem, which is a satire against the vices and follies of his age, contains 3,000 lines. From this poem have been derived three glorious hymns -- "Jerusalem the golden," "Brief life is here our portion," and "For thee, O dear, dear country."

Other noted Latin hymn-writers who followed the two Bernards included Thomas of Celano who, in the thirteenth century, wrote the masterpiece among judgment hymns, *Dies irae, dies illa*, of which Walter Scott has given us the English version, "That day of wrath, that dreadful day"; Adam of St. Victor, who was the composer of more than one hundred sequences of high

lyrical order; Jacobus de Benedictis, who is thought to be the writer of *Stabat mater dolorosa*, the pathetic Good Friday hymn which in its adapted form is known as "Near the cross was Mary weeping"; and Thomas Aquinas, who was the author of *Lauda, Sion, salvatorem*, a glorious hymn of praise. With these writers the age of Latin hymnody is brought to a close.