

CAROLS WITH
THE MONKS



COMMENTARY
2024

Creator Alme Siderum

D*o not be afraid.* I announce to you good news of great joy which is for all people. For tonight, in Bethlehem, is born for us a Saviour, Christ the Lord. Some of us have come from near, others from far, but it is God who has brought us together.

When you look up at the stars, do you think of the origin of the universe, and in particular of the uncalculable fine-tuning that was present from its beginning, and which prepared the way for us? St. Therese of Lisieux, as a little girl, used to love to walk while looking up at the stars, as her father walked behind her and guided her steps. The time of Advent recalls such a journey, when Magi left their homeland, guided only by the light of a star, guided by hope.

Our first song is an ancient Advent Vespers hymn, “Creator of the stars of night”.

Let us keep watch this night, as the shepherds did, and join in the singing of the angels. We have arrived at Bethlehem, as the Magi did. And when we finally see Him here, together with His mother, in the Holy Eucharist on this altar, wrapped in the cloths of His humility, let us bow down and worship Him, and receive His divine blessing. We all have a task, and there's so much to do. A home to be built, which is beautiful too. Mutual love and repentance of sin, these are the things which do honor to Him. Merry Christmas!

Stille Nacht

Our next carol is the beloved Silent Night, sung in the original German. *Stille Nacht* was written in 1818 in the Austrian town of Oberndorf bei Salzburg. On Christmas Eve, assistant priest Father Josef Mohr visited his friend, schoolteacher and composer Franz Xaver Gruber, requesting music for a poem to be performed at Midnight Mass that very night. This urgent request resulted in the masterpiece we all love.

Stille Nacht presents us with a vision of heavenly rest—*himmlische Ruh*—in the midst of a troubled, tired world sleeping in darkness. We see Mary and Joseph, awake and gazing quietly on this *holder Knabe im lockigen Haar*, this fair boy with the curly hair, Jesus at his birth.

As we listen, let us hear the invitation to join the holy couple in their peace tonight, by rising from sleep, turning away from the works of darkness and embracing the light of Jesus.

“Still, Still, Still”

Taking the theme of stillness from “Silent Night,” our next piece is an Austrian Christmas lullaby, “Still, Still, Still.” We sing not only to the Infant Savior born this holy night but also to our own souls as we strive to become childlike, trusting in his redemption so mightily won for us. In these sacred hours, as we await the joyful celebration of His birth, we find rest in the presence of the Prince of Peace.

Throughout Advent, we have prepared our hearts to welcome Him, and now the hour draws near. Yet our preparation extends beyond remembering His first coming in Bethlehem – we await also His second coming. That day will reveal the visible triumph of our Savior over all creation. As we contemplate that future dawn of justice and peace, let us embrace this lullaby’s tender invitation, to “dream of the joyous day to come.”

The Work of Christmas

Bah, Humbug! After all those weeks of hustle and bustle in preparation for Christmas, we all know this splendid day will soon come to an end. And then it's back to daily life, to the tune of the Christmas blues. Is it really worth it? Aren't we just fooling ourselves with a few fleeting moments of bliss? Surely after all the excitement of Christmas, those unwelcome feelings of exhaustion, bewilderment, and dissatisfaction will be knocking at the door once again?

Don't give the grinch an inch! Listen closely as we sing this composition, the Work of Christmas written by theologian Howard Thurman and set to music by Dan Forrest. Christmas is worth it and these men tell us why.

Mary Did you Know

Have you ever contemplated what it was like for Mary being the mother of the Saviour of the world? This question inspired the lyrics for our next carol, now a modern classic. “Mary did you know?” the song asks, wondering at the mystery that a tiny baby could be God in the flesh, destined to perform miracles, rule the nations and save us all.

Rather than providing answers, the song leaves us pondering this great truth. We might recall the Gospel passage where St. Elizabeth says to Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

What about us? Do we believe? Do we know? – that God is with us in the ordinariness of our lives? That He came for our redemption and will fulfill our deepest longings? When we celebrate Christmas do we remember this? When we come to receive Holy Communion do we know that we receive the same Christ Child that Mary brought into the world?

Our society tells us to make our own truths. Some question, if God is all-good why would He allow suffering? But they forget that this life is not the end of the story. In the Kingdom of Heaven “the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dead will live again. The lame will leap the dumb will speak the praises of the Lamb.” Whether we believe it or not, there is a God and He has a plan.

O Magnum Mysterium

In our carols tonight, we've sung about the peaceful stillness of that first Christmas night. We've sung about the hope which the Saviour's birth brings to all of suffering humanity. In this last carol, *O Magnum Mysterium*, we turn to contemplative adoration.

The text comes from the Vigils of Christmas in the Roman Breviary and dates back to medieval times. Morten Lauridsen, a composer active in Los Angeles, created this musical setting in 1994. He said that the work is meant as a quiet song of profound inner joy, with music expressing both the mystery of the Incarnation and Mary's tenderness for her child.

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah reproved the people of Israel: whereas the ox knows its master's manger and the ass its master's crib, Israel did not know its Maker and Lord. Now, with the birth of Jesus, the Lord himself chose to appear among these lowly animals. Here is where we will find the One who guides history and holds our hearts in his hands. Let us kneel before him in reverent homage and humble confidence!