

# CAROLS WITH THE MONKS



## COMMENTARY 2025

## Veni, Veni Emmanuel

**D**eearly beloved, it is my joy to wish you God's blessing and peace on this night celebrating Christ's birth. Truly, God is with us. The Child born for us is the Saviour of the world. This joy we share with you in the carols we sing.

Our first piece, *Veni Emmanuel*, is the well-known Latin Advent hymn in Michael John Trotta's adaptation. Its roots reach back to the ancient "O" antiphons, sung in the final days before Christmas. In each antiphon, Christ is invoked by a different title and called upon to come: "come and save us." In tonight's version, the repeated *veni* becomes an urgent, unceasing plea, giving voice to the deepest longing of our hearts. Yet do we truly know that longing? Do we listen to the quiet song sung deep within our own soul?

The antiphons proclaim: *O Sapientia, Adonai, Radix Jesse, Clavis David, Oriens, Rex Gentium, Emmanuel*—each revealing a different aspect of Christ's saving work. When their first letters are read in reverse, they form the acrostic *ERO CRAS*, meaning "I will be there tomorrow": the divine answer to our persistent *veni*. Three phrases emerge: *Veni. Emmanuel. ERO CRAS*. Come. God is with us. I will be there tomorrow.

Why cry out for Him to come when He is already with us? And if He is with us now, why does He promise tomorrow? Because though He came at Christmas and dwells among us, we always long for more of Him. He will come again in glory, and in His Presence all mankind will find at last that which it truly desires.

## Child of the Poor

**C**old. Lonely. Forgotten. In the chaos of our days – searching, scrolling, surviving – we easily miss Him. But the Word of God still comes. Silently. Insistently. He comes as stifled cry, a shiver under thin blankets, a hollow ache in an empty stomach. He comes in every person we have learned to step around.

Pain and sorrow cut deep channels through the human heart. And into those depths, God enters with His love. He comes to share the pain. He comes in poverty.

Poverty is not just lack of money. It is the terror of being forgotten, the weight of being unwanted, the silence of being unheard. There, in that very emptiness, God comes.

O frightened heart, do not be afraid of poverty. Do not run from the poor. Do not turn away from the pain. The Child born in a stable is waiting there—in the low places, in the lonely places, in the places no one else will go.

As we sing our next carol, *Child of the Poor*, let it not be a distant lullaby. May it pierce us. May it break us open. Let it inspire us to make this Christmas unlike any other we have celebrated. God is waiting to meet you. The one who hears the cry of the poor enters into the heart of God.

## *Les anges dans nos campagnes*

**O**n this night, as the shepherds watched their flocks, they heard a heavenly melody echoing round about the mountains of Bethlehem: glory to God in the highest! The angels, those cheerful messengers, were singing the first strains of the melody which Christ Jesus, the high priest of the new and everlasting covenant, was introducing from heaven into this earthly exile of ours.

Our next carol, *Les anges dans nos campagnes*, recalls this solemn moment of the shepherds in the countryside. The song may come from Lorraine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; it became popular especially from 1842 on, when it was printed in a collection of carols. In English, it was adapted to become the memorable hymn, *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

In a half hour, we will sing the Vigils of Christmas with psalms and readings. The silent Babe in the manger is now our great High Priest in heaven, and when we pray as his Church, he joins our voices to his own in the celestial chorus of all the redeemed, interceding for the salvation of the world.

## Shepherds Shake Off Your Drowsy Sleep

**O**ur next song is a traditional French Christmas carol originating from Besançon in the eastern part of France.

It is addressed to shepherds, those of us who are a little older, and bear responsibility for little ones. Perhaps as children we wanted to rise early on Christmas morning, but as adults, do we not often find ourselves weary, even dead tired, amid all the childish joy of Christmas? Do we not sometimes grow old in our souls? Well, this song is for us then.

Who is this child – who would raise a little girl, raise a young man, raise his friend Lazarus from the tomb, and spoke of death as “sleep”? Who is He, who conquered death itself by dying, and rose from the grave to give us His immortal life? It is He who was born for us in a stable, placed for us in a manger, a little child who grew up as a shoot, almighty God, the Sun of Justice.

I announce to you a great joy, for all peoples. Today is born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. O Shepherds shake off your drowsy sleep. It is the birthday of God!

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## Angels from the Realms of Glory

When we consider God – His majesty, glory, and splendor, His goodness and purity – our hearts must bow before Him. We are compelled to worship with reverent fear.

Yet when we see an infant babe, we instinctively draw near. We smile and delight in him, desiring to take him in our arms and hold him close.

Tonight, these two actions find their harmony. We have a newborn King who is God-with-us. Our penultimate carol, “Angels from the Realms of Glory”, exhorts us to come, to draw near Him, and to worship. The glorious angels proclaim it, the shepherds respond to it, the wise men journey toward it—and now we too are called to draw near to God tonight. Entering the hymn of all creation, we worship God, now presented before us in our own familiar flesh.

As you hear this melody build its repeated calls to “come and worship,” let your hearts take up the Infant Redeemer and hold close the “Desired of all nations.” His divine holiness is terrifying to our unpurified gaze, yet He comes down to us in gentleness that we might approach Him without fear. Worship Him with all your being. Lay down your life before this newborn King, for He alone is worthy of glory and power and might. In His quiet and tender presence, we are purified.

## The First Noel

Our final hymn tonight comes to us from Southwestern England in the 13th century. Its probable origins lie in the popular “Miracle Plays” of the time, theatrical productions that portrayed biblical scenes to the delight and edification of medieval audiences. This hymn, of course, is none other than the timeless favourite, “The First Noel.”

Yet tonight’s rendition of this classic carol prepares our hearts for an even greater drama that beckons us beyond mere theatrics. Woven within the sweet keys of the organ, the laudable harmony of the choir, and the sweeping strings of the violin is an invitation to share in the shepherds’ unspeakable awe and wonder at the Good News proclaimed by the angelic host: the very same Good News we receive now: that on this night, “born is the King of Israel.”

Just as the shepherds followed the light of the star to adore the newborn Christ in the manger, may this beloved hymn stir our hearts to follow the light of faith to adore Christ in the midnight Mass that approaches. Let us go forth in Christian joy knowing that our Lord is as near to us in the Eucharist as He was to those blessed shepherds on that First Noel.