

CAROLS WITH THE MONKS



COMMENTARY 2020

Minuit, Chrétien

M*inuit, Chrétien* is a French Christmas hymn familiar to us all, better known to English speakers as “O Holy Night.” The origins of the hymn go back to 1843, to Fr. Maurice Gilles, the parish priest at Roquemaure in southern France. Having restored the stained glass windows and renovated the organ of the Church, he commissioned Placide Cappeau, an irreligious French wine merchant and part-time poet, to write a Christmas poem to celebrate the end of the work with dignity.

Cappeau was happy to do it but, being an irregular church attender, he had to reread the gospel of Luke to brush up on the nativity story. Nonetheless, he completed it in time for a reading at midnight mass on Christmas Eve. That’s why, in French, the piece was called *Minuit, Chrétiens* (*Midnight, Christians*) after the opening line in the first stanza:

*Midnight, Christians, is the solemn hour,
When God as man descended unto us
To erase the stain of original sin,
And to end the wrath of His Father.
The entire world thrills with hope
On this night that gives it a Saviour.*

Some years later, Adolphe Adam, a French composer best known for the opera *Giselle*, set *Minuit, Chrétiens* to music. Adam was a Jew and not in the habit of celebrating Christmas, but he composed a most exquisite score for Cappeau’s lyrics, creating a Christmas song that immediately became popular across France.

Steeped in the mystery of this Holy Night, *Minuit, Chrétien* humbly draws us to our knees so that, with grateful hearts, we may sing of our Redeemer.

I Wonder as I Wander

I *Wonder as I Wander* arose entirely from a rudimentary fragment which the composer heard while traveling through the Appalachians. He is John Jacob Niles, a folklorist, who discovered various treasured wonders of folk music. In December of 1933, while working as a surveyor he transcribed the song from the lines sung by the young daughter of an evangelist. The title of the song clearly invites us – as with Niles – to ponder the mysteries of Christmas as we wander the sometimes meandering paths of our life here on earth.

The carol, with its predominantly minor keys, establishes a pensive atmosphere, calling us to introspection. It allows us to ask questions such as: Why did our Lord stoop down so low for ‘poor and on’ry people like you and like I’? What can we truly offer him in our lowly state? Do we allow the brightness of the Christmas Star to encompass the entirety of the world or just ourselves? As we search for answers, this carol helps us to forego the occasional superficiality of our lives. It opens our hearts and minds to the dynamism of faith as evidenced by the birth, passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Since the majority of our life is a pilgrimage, with Christ as our travelling companion and with these beautiful lyrics on our lips, we can with confidence journey towards our destiny and final end.

Süßer die Glocken Nie Klingen

One of the most beloved German Christmas carols is *Süßer die Glocken nie klingen* – never do the bells ring more sweetly. Its melody derives from an old Thuringian folk song, but about 150 years ago, Friedrich Wilhelm Kritzinger adapted it to a new purpose.

Never do the bells ring more sweetly, the song says, than they do at Christmas time. It is as though the angels were singing again of peace and joy, as they sang on that blessed night. O bells with a holy sound, resound through all the earth.

And when the bells ring out, the Christ child swiftly hears. He swings down from heaven and hurries to the Church, to bless father, mother, and child. O bells with a holy sound, resound through all the earth.

It rings with a lovely sound far across the sea, bringing joy to all in blessed Christmastime. Let us all, then, shout out with joyful melody: O bells with a holy sound – resound through all the earth!

This song is indeed child-like, but not childish. Christ our God became a child to conquer sin and death. It was Christmas eve, 1945, in Nagasaki, Japan, when, amidst the human and spiritual wreckage after the atomic bomb, some parishioners recovered the cathedral bell which had been buried under rubble, and securely hung it on a tripod of cypress logs. That night, the holy sound of the bell, the sound of which our song sings, resounded throughout the darkness. To the Christians sitting in their drafty huts, it seemed that their cathedral had risen from its ashes to herald Christ's birth. They listened in awe like the shepherds, when from the dark sky above Bethlehem came singing.

Tu Scendi Dalle Stelle

There is a Christmas carol so dear to Italians that Christmas would not be Christmas, were it not sung. It is called *Tu scendi dalle stelle* (“You come down from the stars”). In fact, it was originally written in the language of Naples. Its author was St. Alphonsus de’ Liguori, who rekindled fervent devotion to the passion of Christ and to his mother Mary. He composed this carol shortly before Christmas 1754 in the course of a mission he was preaching in Nola.

The carol reflects the simple and warm-hearted piety of the saint, who opens up in amazement at the tender, self-sacrificing love which moved the Son of God to undergo privations already as a newborn baby. I paraphrase some of the carol’s transports of love. “From the stars you descend to a freezing cave – how much it cost you to love me! From the joy of the Father’s bosom to the prickly straw – why so much suffering? For love of me. And why do you yet cry and wail? I know why. Because you see me so ungrateful for such great love. Even now as you sleep, your heart is watchful: you are thinking already of how you will die for love of me. Can I then love anything but you? O Mary, since I can love your Jesus so little, do you love him for me.”

Gaudete

What emotion marks the birth of a child more than joy? As Jesus tells us, “a woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world” (Jn 16:21). The carol, *Gaudete*, takes up the song of the whole cosmos which, after years of subjection to futility, rejoices ecstatically at the birth of the one for whom and through whom all things were made. At last, “the time of grace has come –what we have wished for,” the time when God Himself has come into the world. Nature stands in awe, marvelling at God’s astounding plan for the renewal of the whole world in Christ His Son.

Rooted in the liturgical piety of the Middle Ages, this carol was first written down in the sixteenth century to verses found in Bohemian books of the fifteenth century. Though a bit on the boisterous side for liturgical worship, it is deeply imbued with the spirit of the liturgy for it is in the liturgy that history and cosmos culminate in the celebration of Christ’s saving work. After the first and second verses divulge the meaning of time and nature respectively, the third verse points us to the temple of Ezekiel’s vision “whence the light is risen and salvation has been found.” In the liturgy, eternity enters time and the work of our redemption is accomplished. God has truly become man and been born of the Virgin Mary, symbolized by the closed Eastern gate of Ezekiel’s vision through which God alone has passed. How can we not break out in song together joyfully to sing the praises of the Lord with all creation? Rejoice, rejoice, for Christ is born!

Of the Father's Love Begotten

O *f the Father's Love Begotten* is a chant dating back to the fourth century, being a translation of the Latin poem written by Aurelius Prudentius. The original Latin chant was titled “*Corde Natus*” which is rendered in English as “*Born from the Heart*”. The words of the chant speak of God the Father’s love which has existed from all eternity. This Love, born from the Father’s heart, took on flesh as a wee babe this very night; Christ Jesus Our Lord and Saviour, born of the Most Holy and Ever Virgin Mary. In taking on our human nature, Christ willed to share all our sufferings. One of the verses of this poem which is not featured in the arrangement we will be singing has the words:

*He is found in human fashion,
Death and sorrow here to know,
That the race of Adam's children
Doomed by law to endless woe,
May not henceforth die and perish
In the dreadful gulf below,
Evermore and evermore!*

In this broken world and in these dark times in which we live, may we learn to encounter the eternal Love of the Father in the Person of Christ Jesus, Who came to share in our deepest sufferings.