

CAROLS WITH
THE MONKS



COMMENTARY

A Boy is Born in Bethlehem

A *Boy is Born in Bethlehem* (*Puer natus in Bethlehem*) is a carol with its origins going back at least to the 13th century in Bohemia, today's Czech Republic. With short, stirring couplets, it celebrates the striking contrasts in the Christmas mystery: the fresh-faced newborn is none other than the Son of the Most High God. The rousing refrain stirs us to adore him with a new song.

One theme of the carol in particular is striking. The Child, it says, comes forth from his mother's womb like a bridegroom striding out of his bridal chamber. He is a royal bridegroom who takes his throne in a manger. Attending on his royal majesty and acknowledging him as Lord are the ox and the ass. This is not a mock scene but the tenderness of a Creator God who delights to come down to the level of his creatures. Will we stand back with offended pride or approach with joyful simplicity?

A La Nanita, Nana

A *La Nanita, Nana (Lull, little lullaby)* is a song of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Jesus. It was formed in the 19th century by the Spanish poet and priest Juan Francisco Muñoz y Pabón, and the composer José Ramón Gomis. How simple and natural it is for a mother to sing her child to sleep; this must be as old as humanity itself. And yet, the world can only marvel at the mystery of this mother calming the heart of her child with her soothing voice. For she is only a creature, and her child is the Son of God, the creator and saviour of the world. In Jesus's eyes she sees the light of her life. In His beautiful hands, temples, mouth, and arms, she also is pained by the thought of His death. "The little spring flows, clear and resonant... the nightingale sings and weeps." The freedom of love that pervades this mystical lullaby is mixed with joy and sorrow. And when the holy mother, gazing at her divine child as he dreams, finally sees a smile on his face, she too rests in the true peace that all will be well. The small portion of this song which we will sing, has become a famous Christmas Carol, and has even become a Spanish lullaby that mothers sing to their children, replacing the name *Jesus* with *niño* or *niña* – my little child.

Angels from the Realms of Glory

Though many a Christmas carol reminds us of the events of the past, we tend to forget how they relate to us today, here, right now. In *Angels from the Realms of Glory*, written by a Scottish poet James Montgomery in 1816, we hear again the story of that first Christmas. But let us not forget, the birth of Jesus was the beginning of a new creation not the end. This new creation is present today in Jesus' mystical body, the Church, in us, who are a part of that body.

So when we hear about the angels, we can think of the communion of the saints who by their example, teaching and intercession, point us to Jesus. When we hear about the shepherds who were the first to receive the good news and spread it to the world, we can think of our shepherds – the pope, bishops, and priests – and how they help us receive and spread the gospel to others. When we hear about the three kings, we can reflect on the many people who have never heard of the gospel or, in searching for the truth, are waiting to find it in Christ.

With all creation then, let us join in praising God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As we sing this last carol, let us prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus – here and now – in this most wonderful celebration of the Mass where angels, shepherds, sheep, and kings, gather together to receive the new born King.

Bóg się rodzi

Bóg *Się Rodzi* rose “like the waves of the sea” from the lips of prisoners at Auschwitz in 1941 as they struggled to kindle the light of Christ in the darkness of a concentration camp. It was also the basis of St. John Paul II’s talk at the traditional exchange of Christmas greetings in 1996.

“Bóg się rodzi“ or “God is born,” regarded by some to be Poland’s national Christmas carol, was written by Franciszek Karpiński to the melody of a coronation polonaise in 1792. The powerful lyrics convey the essential paradox of the Incarnation: *God is born, great powers tremble, Lord of Heaven lies forsaken. Fire is frozen, splendour darkens, feeble nature God has taken. Lowly born, yet Lord to praises, mortal yet the King of ages. Now indeed the Word made Flesh has come on earth to dwell among us.* Let us approach Christmas this year with a lively faith in the Son of God who “became man that we might become God” so that we too may shed His light upon the darkness of our own time.

Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light

Break Forth, O Beauteous Heavenly Light comes from a longer hymn published in 1641 by a prolific German hymn-writer named Johann Rist. His contemporary, Johann Schop set it to music but it became famous when Johann Sebastian Bach harmonised the melody and included it in his “Christmas Oratorio”.

The carol awakens us to a cosmic spiritual battle. This is part of the Christmas mystery, indeed part of the whole mystery of Christ. Christ enters the world “weak in infancy”, yet his mission is to break the power of Satan and bring eternal peace. At Christmas, our hearts are indeed drawn to the warmth of his love for us: the paltry furnishings of a stable suited him just fine as his royal chamber. But let us not be fooled by the quaint setting. His humility and cheerful silence are endearing to us men; he has taken us for his brothers. But his power shatters the grip of our ancient enemy. Let us with constant praise seek his face.

Carol of the Bells

There is a legend that at the stroke of midnight on the night Jesus was born all the bells on earth suddenly began pealing joyously together of their own accord - and there was never a sound like it for majesty and grandeur. The lyrics of our last carol probably spring from this tradition. Originally a pre-Christian Ukrainian hymn, *Carol of the Bells* was given its now well-known English Christmas lyrics in the 1930s. The words speak of “sweet silver bells” that in unison joyfully announce the good news of Christ’s birth to all people.

In a few moments, after our carolling is over, you will hear the bells in our own tower break into joyful pealing. Both the lyrics of our carol and the ringing of the bells raise our thoughts and our hearts to the choir of Angels which on this same night joyfully announced the Saviour’s birth. Like the Angelic choir the sound of the ringing bells, which can be heard for miles around, is an invitation to all people and creation itself to come and adore the Lord of all. As the words of the Psalm which we hear so often in this Christmas season say: “Shout to the Lord all the earth, ring out your joy... Let the rivers clap their hands, and the hills ring out their joy at the presence of the Lord, for He comes, He comes to rule the earth.”

Carol of the Russian Children

Carol of the Russian Children is from the 16th century, possibly having roots in an ancient pagan song that was later converted into a Christian song. Slow in pace, the melodic almost mystical sounds of the folk carol reflect the harshness yet great beauty of the winter Russian countryside. The lyrics invite us to wonder at the mystery unfolding before us, to wonder like a child kneeling before the manger: *Shaggy pony, shaggy oxen, gentle shepherds wait the light: little Jesu, little Mother, good Saint Joseph come this night...*

Child of the Poor/ What Child is This

This Carol blends two into one: *What Child is This?* and *Child of the Poor*. The former, written by William C. Dix in 1865, is one of the few Christmas carols which do not have their own musical arrangement. Its lyrics are set to the tune, “Greensleeves” (a traditional English folk song, thought to have been written in the late 16th or early 17th century), and create a haunting and beautiful image of the birth of our Lord. Added to this arrangement is the counter melody introduced by the *Child of the Poor*, a carol written by Scott Soper and published in 1994.

Reading the lyrics of both carols, side by side, is sobering, to say the least. We can often celebrate Christmas content in our own comforts, but these carols wake us up to celebrate Christmas authentically: *What Child is This?...who is this who lives with the lowly, sharing their sorrows, knowing their hunger? Who is this child...this stranger...this outcast...who comes into the world as a poor and homeless person? This is Christ, revealed to the world in the eyes of a child, a child of the poor.*” Being poor, the child Jesus makes us rich; being homeless, the child Jesus makes us a home in his heart. How then, can we not feel compelled to go out of our comforts? Why deprive ourselves of celebrating Christmas authentically? Let us go out to meet the poor and homeless Jesus in the faces of *our* poor and *our* homeless?

Christmas Day is Come!

C*hristmas Day is Come*, a traditional Irish carol, is a beautiful example of an infamous popular song being converted by Christianity. The melody is a tobacco smuggling tune from the eighteenth century called “The brown little mallet”. But now instead of rejoicing at the arrival of the tobacco smugglers we marvel at how Christ conceals himself in his coming. “He steals to us at midnight” “in poverty and misery to pay for all our sin.” As this song has been converted, so it bids us follow. “For mirth can never content us without a conscience clear. And thus we’ll find true pleasure in all the usual cheer.” Yes! Christmas Day is come.

Coventry Carol

God's peace and joy filled the first little church in Bethlehem. But in the outer darkness, the evil powers were already scheming. King Herod was searching for the child to destroy Him, and when the Magi did not return to inform him of the child's whereabouts, his fury burst forth, and he gave orders that all the children in the region under the age of 2 be slain. It is this very event which an English medieval play from the 14th century portrayed, part of the cycle of mystery plays performed at Coventry each year.

The word had already gone out that Herod's soldiers were coming, and poor mothers were singing a melody of peace to their children, trembling with fear lest the slightest cry reveal their children to the soldiers. And this is how so many of us feel, fragile, trying to give peace to our children, while surrounded by a world that is so cruel. What joy can there be in Christmas, when such anguish and sorrow follow so soon afterward? Already here, it is contained in a mystery. The child Jesus is laid in a manger in Bethlehem. The faithful saw the real connection, and performed this play on the feast of Corpus Christi. Yes, our sorrows are real, but the light of Faith which comes from God is far greater, so even our sorrows have a place on this holy night of Christ's birth.

Ecce Nomen Domini Emmanuel

Ecce nomen Domini (*Behold the name of the Lord*) is a Latin medieval song. It is in the style of Gregorian chant but was probably used on popular occasions.

The very title calls our attention to the name of Christ. In our families, when a child is about to be born, we think of a name to call him. We wait, however, until he is born, until we can see his face before deciding on his name. That name will in some way spell his identity, his mission in life. With the holy Child of Bethlehem, it is similar but there is more. He was given his name Jesus by divine authority, by the angel Gabriel at the moment he was conceived. Not just that, he was named seven hundred years earlier when Isaiah prophesied that he would be called Emmanuel. Jesus, Emmanuel – these names promise that God himself will be in our midst as Saviour when this Child is born.

How long has such a Saviour been expected! And we, how long have we known his name! Let us then invoke him. For he gives us his name so that we may turn to him in friendship and experience his salvation. We discover that he is the Saviour who heals all our ills.

Ehre sei Gott

In *Ehre sei Gott*, we go to the fields beyond town, to where the shepherds are watching their flocks. How rude, even squalid is the scene! Dirty, unlettered men, dull sheep, biting cold, the dead of night! But God delights to break in where man is least taken up with his own honour. God loves to honour what society scorns.

There, in those poor conditions, the angels break out into joyous song. Their words are the title of our carol, “Ehre sei Gott!” Honour to God in the highest! Felix Mendelssohn, the well-known German composer, penned it in 1846. Over and over again, the angels echo their jubilant cry, “Ehre sei Gott”, which inspires us to ask confidently in the last verse, “Deliver us from reproach.” What reproach? If God so graciously stoops to honour us with his presence, we need not fear the scorn of men. Rather, out of awe at the holiness of God, we ask not to be excluded by our own sins from his mercy. There in the joyful throng of angels, we too want to sing, “Honour to God in the highest!”

Es Sungen Drei Engel

On this holy night, our sentiments are drawn to the tender care and rugged warmth which the Christmas figures around the manger exude. Yet there is also a dazzling, ineffable side of this scene, the Eternal Word of God. The tender, the dazzling - in a sense, it is the angels who bridge the divide between these two. That is precisely the case with this carol.

Es sungen drei Engel (Three Angels Sang) is derived from a much longer thirteenth-century German hymn which had no connections with Christmas originally. An extract from this long hymn was first printed in a chorale-book in Mainz, Germany in 1605. The version we sing here is the result of further development from popular usage.

The carol pictures three angels singing a sweet strain that tinkles in the high heavens yet insistently calls on man below to praise God, his loving Maker. How powerfully but gently they compel us! To praise God, to lift our voices to him – it does us so much good! Then, the last verse promises, Mary's little Child will transform all our misery and our pain into joy and gain.

Eya! Novus Annus Est

Eya! *Novus Annus Est* is a Latin song dating from the thirteenth century and ascribed to a certain Philip the Chancellor of the University of Paris. It incorporates a liturgical hymn for New Year and punctuates it with an exclamation of praise, “Joy! It is the new year!” Why speak already of the new year? The Church celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ for eight days, at the end of which it honours especially his Mother, the Virgin Mary, on New Year’s Day.

Now in this piece there is a theme perhaps unexpected in a Christmas song: the future suffering of Christ. In one breath we acclaim, “Christ is born for us”. In the next we say, “He allowed himself to be crucified.” How do these go together? The answer lies in the phrase “for us”. All that Christ did, he did for us. And so, when we gaze on the freshness of his newborn face, we already read in it the marred face of the crucified One, as also the radiant face of the glorified One. Let us not baulk at this inevitable suffering of Christ but rejoice in the refrain, “God has become man and yet (remains) immortal!”

Gaudete

Gaudete (*Rejoice*), is a sacred Latin Christmas carol, written down in the 16th century book *Piae Cantiones*, whose words and melodies have roots that spread into the Middle Ages. The verses of this song are also found in Bohemian song books from the 15th century. They echo, in reverent melodies, the great meaning which this birth of Christ has for the world. The first verse speaks of its meaning for history. The second verse speaks of its meaning for nature. A third verse speaks of its meaning in regard to the temple, and the fourth verse calls us all to sing as God's new creation, blessing Him. The resonance of these verses with all things, in heaven and on earth, in time and in eternity, is a sign of their inspired nature. And yet, if we are unable to comprehend their full meaning, it doesn't matter. The refrain returns to the essential message: Rejoice! Rejoice! For Christ is born. He is born of Mary ever Virgin. Rejoice!

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen was first published in 1827 as a carol sung in the streets of London. Charles Dickens used it in *A Christmas Carol*: Ebenezer Scrooge, the crabby and faultfinding miser, hears it sung jauntily in the street and threatens to hit the singer with a ruler if he does not cease immediately. Fortunately, Scrooge is about to be enlightened about the true meaning of Christmas, and to be made merry – and generous – himself.

Like Scrooge, we too can easily be caught up in things, money and possessions and our hearts are left barren and listless. The tidings of comfort and joy, which we hear tonight propose a more human story: instead of things, we can be caught up in people: with Christ our Saviour, with the Angels and shepherds, with Joseph and Mary, with one another.

Good Christian Men, Rejoice

With *Good Christian Men, Rejoice*, we hear commanding words of grace filled joy. Its original inspiration comes from heaven, literally, in the form of a song taught to a German mystic and Dominican friar by angels. Near the end of a night spent in contemplation in 1328, Blessed Henry Suso recounts the following:

There came to me a youth, who seemed as though he were a heavenly musician sent by God; and with the youth there came many other noble youths, like the first in their manner, only that he seemed to have something greater than the rest, as if he were a prince-angel. Now this same angel came up to me very joyously, and said that God had sent them down to me, to bring heavenly joys in the midst of my sufferings; that I must cast off all sorrows from my mind and accompany them, and that I must also dance with them in a heavenly manner. Then they drew me by the hand into the dance, and the youth began a joyous melody about the child Jesus, which begins like this:—"In dulci júbilo," When I heard the dear Name of Jesus sounding so beautifully, I became so joyful in heart and feeling, that the very memory of my sufferings vanished.

Inspired with the same heart and soul, but in different words, *Good Christian Men, Rejoice* urgently bids us to let go of our sorrows with the breathtaking news: Christ is born today! And He comes to save us all. The only possible response to such news of grace is a shout of joy. In sweet jubilation, then, let us join with the angels in singing with all our heart and soul and voice.

Huron Carol

H*uron Carol* is an epiphany hymn composed some 400 years ago by Saint Jean Brebeuf while he served the Huron peoples along the St. Lawrence River. The “Huron Carol”, or “ee-sus a-ha-ton-nyah” in the Wendat language (“Jesus is Born”), is considered to be the oldest Christmas carol originating in the Americas. Over the generations many translations have appeared. Yet none can truly match the original in its expression of the authentic wedding between Gospel and culture.

The carol begins with an appeal for a true “discernment of spirits”, a task which every man seeking God must wrestle with. It asks the people to turn from the trickster spirit who enslaves man, to rejoice in the wonders being arranged by the One they acknowledge as “Gitchie Manitou”. This is actually the Ojibwe name for the “Great Spirit”, who was acknowledged under similar titles by many of the tribes from Lower Canada, the Plains, and west of the Rockies. The “Great Spirit” brings the peoples by a star to Jesus, the son born of Mary. The last image the carol leaves us with is the promise of being “adopted”. Thanks to Jesus, we can become “sons of Manitou”.

Herein lies the good news St Jean Brebeuf gave his life to share: the Spirit of God is at work, bringing the Incarnation to every culture, bringing all of us to divine adoption.

I Saw Three Ships

I *Saw Three Ships* is a traditional English folk song and the words of this carol (of which there are several versions) were written by wandering minstrels as they traveled through the country. In the original version of the carol, the Three Ships were the ones bringing the relics of the wise men to Cologne cathedral in Germany. However, since the Middle Ages, when it was first written, there have been many different lyrics with different Bible characters being on the ships. The most common lyrics used today are about Mary and Jesus traveling to Bethlehem.

The song has a strong message of joy and happiness during the Christmas season that everyone can appreciate by comparing the birth of Jesus Christ to ships coming into port which conveys the extreme excitement that one should have felt on the day of His birth. May we too be filled with this joy and excitement as the opportunity comes again of welcoming the infant Christ into our hearts and families.

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.

Il est né le divin Enfant

Il est né le divin Enfant (*He is born, the divine Child*): this French common people's carol, guessed to be from the 18th century, was handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The first time it was put in writing was in 1862 by Romain Grosjean, organist of the Cathedral of Saint-Dié-des-Vosges.

The carol takes up the usual Christmas themes of joy and jubilation at the birth of the divine child. But one of the lesser known verses brings out another aspect of Christmas. He, the divine infant, is the one who waits for us. The verse says "he wants our hearts, he awaits them, he is here to win them over, he wants our hearts he awaits them, promptly then, give them over to him."

*Il veut nos cœurs, il les attend:
Il est là pour faire leur conquête
Il veut nos cœurs, il les attend :
Donnons-les lui donc promptement !*

Jesu Redemptor Omnium

Jesu Redemptor Omnium is an ancient hymn dating back to the sixth century, and has sometimes been attributed to the bishop St. Ambrose. The version of the hymn we are going to sing tonight derives from the Roman Breviary version of 1632. It was sung for Vespers and Matins on Christmas day. Our community still keeps up the tradition; we sang an English version of it a few hours ago at Vespers and we will be singing it for Vespers almost every day until the Epiphany on January 6th.

It is a powerful hymn which praises Jesus who, though equal to the Father, took on the lowly form of humankind by becoming a child for the sake of our salvation. The hymn is triumphant in style, and emphasises not just the littleness of the Christ-child, but also the glory of God who has worked such great mysteries. After all, this is what Christmas is all about – giving praise, glory and homage to a God who cared so much for humankind as to send his only Son to obtain our salvation. The second stanza reads:

*Salvation's Author, call to mind
How, taking form of humankind,
Borne of a Virgin undefiled,
Thou in man's flesh becam'st a Child.*

Leise rieselt der Schnee

Who rejoices most at Christmas? Who is most filled with expectation? Is it not children? The next carol we will sing anticipates the joy of Christmas through the eyes of a child. It is the German song *Leise rieselt der Schnee*, or in English “Softly falls each snowflake”. A German Lutheran pastor, Eduard Ebel, published it in 1895 as a “child’s song”.

To a child, Christmas promises softly drifting snow, a glassy smooth frozen lake, and the shimmering reflection of the white woods. But what is the real cause for expectation? The Christ Child is coming soon: *Christkind kommt bald!* Even a child knows there is grief and there is sorrow in this life. Yet in this season, he knows too that with the presence of the Christ Child, the clamour of grief and sorrow are stilled and on that holy night the melodious ringing of the angel choir alone prevails.

Let us also turn with child-like hearts to the mystery of this holy night. Let the peaceful joy of the Christ Child still the disquiet of our hearts. So we too shall worship God with gladness.

Lo, How A Rose

Lo, *How A Rose*, was written anonymously in Germany in the 16th century. Its message recalls the memory of God's promises and invites us to behold, with Mary, the Rose which is Jesus Christ her Son.

Long ago Isaiah prophesied that a child would be born of a Virgin. In Mary, the Virgin Mother, we see this prophecy fulfilled. Her womb becomes the soil in which the seed of God's Word takes root, blossoms and grows. As the carol recounts: *to show God's love aright, she bore to us a saviour... true man, yet very God.* What a promise! What a fulfillment! And this promise and fulfillment do not end with Mary. God also wants us to bear fruit. He wants to fulfill His promises in us. We have but to handover our hearts as soil for God's word. And so, responding to the message of this carol, let us pick up the Bible and read a little of God's Word each day.

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.

O Little Town of Bethlehem

O *Little Town of Bethlehem*, composed in 1868 by Phillips Brooks, an American bishop, was set to music by Lewis H. Redner. Hidden in the middle of the carol, so to speak, is a verse on silence, a reality that is often hidden from our lives today. “*How silently, how silently, The wondrous gift is given.*” God comes in silence, yet how often do we hide from silence? Consider our families. Do we foster moments of silence, moments when we put down our smartphones and technological devices and let God’s gift enter in? Christmas invites us to taste something more than frivolous entertainments; it offers us the fruit of silence. God comes in silence. Jesus enters our thoughts in silence, and thus our words and gestures, which flow from our thoughts, become words and gestures of love.

O Magnum Mysterium

The event which is expressed in this carol is the one which was witnessed by the shepherds on the night of Christmas. And it is also the one which we are about to witness. For it was night, and they were keeping watch, when an angel appeared to them, embracing them all in the light of God. It is also night when the Church sings this antiphon, in the divine office of matins. At first the shepherds were filled with fear. But the angel said to them: do not be afraid. I announce to you good news of a great joy, which will be for all the people. For today is born for you a saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And he tells us the sign which we will witness. Here are the words of the antiphon, echoing through the ages in the Church throughout the world, and clothed anew in melody by a contemporary composer, Mortin Lauridsen:

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear the Lord, Jesus Christ. Alleluia!*

Of the Father's Love Begotten

O *f the Father's Love Begotten*, is based on the Latin poem *Corde natus* by the Roman Christian poet Aurelius Prudentius, 4th century. The text was eventually paired with a 13th century plainchant melody and translated into English by John M. Neal in 1854. The melody we will sing was arranged by Edwin T. Childs in 2005. And so what you will hear is truly a carol that unites history in a concert of faith.

At the end of every verse the words *evermore and evermore* are repeated, which tells us that the message of the carol is not limited to the past. It also speaks to us, now, in the present and at the same time leads us forward to our future Heavenly Home!

For instance, in the second verse we sing: *And the babe, the world's Redeemer, first revealed his sacred face*, to which we respond, *evermore and evermore*. In other words, God is *still* revealing His face. The revelation of His face is not limited to the past. He reveals His face to us in the present. He reveals His face to us so that we may journey forward together.

Do not merely *imagine* God now. Look around you! Can you not see His face? Can you not see Jesus in the person next to you?

If not, do not lose heart. As we sing this carol, join us in asking the Lord to increase our faith.

Shepherds, Arise!

S *hepherds arise! Be not afraid:* these are the first words of this traditional English carol. Like a lot of folk songs, the origin of this carol is unknown. But thanks to the Copper family from Rottingdean, Sussex, this carol has been preserved to this day.

Shepherds arise! Be not afraid: The shepherds were afraid when they heard about the birth of Jesus. Imagine...you are sitting in a field on a dark night and suddenly a light breaks through the sky. Angels appear to you and proclaim that the greatest desire of your heart has come into the world. You are dumbfounded, afraid, because you are not sure where this desire will lead you. And yet, stronger than this fear is the joy of the angels, the joy which conquers your fear, wins you over and draws you out of yourself, the joy which impels you to join the angels in singing this song: *sing! Sing all earth! Sing! Sing all earth! Eternal praises sing to our redeemer and our heavenly King!*

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.

The Friendly Beasts

The *Friendly Beasts* is a traditional Christmas carol originating around the 12th-century in France. Set to the melody of the Latin song “Orientis Partibus”, the current English words were written by Robert Davis in the 1920s. Sometimes known as “The Song of the Ass,” “The Donkey Carol” or “The Gift of the Animals,” this carol is distinctive: it depicts a wooden stable and a baby surrounded by “friendly beasts.” Our relationship to the child is familial; he is our “brother, strong and good.” Though the setting is humble, it is warm and inviting. Each “friendly beast” offers Jesus a gift: the donkey offers transportation to Bethlehem for Jesus’ mother; the cow gives its manger as a place to rest; the sheep provides wool for a warm coat. “All the beasts, by some good spell,” are pleased to offer a gift to Emmanuel. “Good spell”: these words leave us with the sense of a magical event where by divine permission even the animals announce the good news.

The Holly and the Ivy

The *Holly and the Ivy*, is shrouded in mystery. The composer is unknown, as well as the era it was composed. While pagan motifs initially dominated in the carol, it was eventually imbued with Christian symbolism. The current version of the carol was published and popularized by Cecil Sharp in England as a part of his *Collection of English Folk Songs* in 1911.

The imagery presented is quite striking, sometimes evoking Christ's Passion more than his birth. Holly represents Christ himself, while ivy signifies the Virgin Mary. The focus is predominantly on Christ, as the ivy is only mentioned at the beginning of the carol, but the link between Christ and His Mother cannot be doubted: as the model of our faith, Mary journeyed with Christ from Bethlehem to Calvary to the Upper Room on Easter Sunday.

It is fitting then that the remainder of the carol is distinctly Paschal in nature: The sharpness of the holly leaf represents Christ's crown of thorns, the bitter bark His death on the wood of the Cross, the berries the salvific shedding of His blood, and the white flower His resurrection. Shrouded in the most profound mysteries of Christ's life, "The Holly and the Ivy" suggests that the joy of Christmas is not complete unless we journey with Mary towards the triumph of the Cross.

The King of Glory

The *King of Glory* was written in five stanzas in 1965 by Father Willard F. Jabusch, a Catholic priest. The hymn is set to the tune of “Promised One,” an Israeli Folk tune that has Hasidic origins, which Father Jabusch learnt while studying in the Holy Land. The song is a mini, scriptural compendium of Christ’s life ranging from our Lord’s birth to his active ministry, his suffering and death, and finally his resurrection. The refrain and first stanza of “The King of Glory” are based on an Advent psalm (Psalm 23:7-8). Stanzas two and three recall Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 4:23: *In all of Galilee, in city or village / he goes among his people, curing their illness. / Sing then of David’s son, our Savior and brother; / in all of Galilee, was never another.* May we ask for a great grace of longing for his heavenly vision. In this year of Mercy let us be filled with the joy and hope of this song as we open wide the gates and welcome the King of glory!

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.”

Veinticinco de Diciembre

V *einticinco de diciembre*, is perhaps the most popular Spanish carol among Anglophone countries. With the recurrent sound of “Fum, fum, fum” in imitation of a guitar or drum, this Catalonian dance-song celebrates with childlike enthusiasm the birth of baby Jesus in the midst of winter’s darkness. The carol bids the woodland birds to build a downy nest for the newborn Saviour and it summons the stars to shine more brightly should he cry. Let us also leave behind our self-concern to make a welcome nest for Jesus in our hearts and, rather than bewailing the present darkness of the world, let us strive to shine more brightly with good deeds so that the Infant Christ who cries in all those who weep may be comforted.

Venit Lumen Tuum

Venit Lumen Tuum, “Your Light Has Come” is a carol born out of the heart of our monastic community. It is a Christmas gift from us to you. Set to chant and polyphony by two of our monks, the biblical text from the prophet Isaiah is used as an antiphon for evening prayer on the feast of the Epiphany. This feast celebrates the manifestation of Christ to the nations. The incarnation of the Word opens up God’s salvation to all nations, who come to Jerusalem to become partakers of the light. The carol expresses the joy and life we receive when Christ our light, comes into our community, our family, and our own hearts. The radiance of this light cannot be contained and kept to ourselves. It shines for the world to see: *Let all nations walk in its radiance, alleluia.*

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night

While *Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night* has been one of the central Christmas hymns for English-speaking Protestants since its first appearance in 1700. In fact, at the time it was the only legally authorized Christmas hymn for the Church of England. Although the authorship of the text is debated, the number of diverse melodies to which it has been set, probably hundreds, suggests no other hymn has been sung to so many tunes and settings. The tune we will sing is widely sung in the United States and is adapted from a soprano aria by George Frederic Handel.

Steeped as the carol is in the history of our Protestant brothers and sisters, it can inspire us to pray for the reason why Christ came: that we may all be one. This Christmas, let us bring Jesus this gift, the gift of our prayer for Christian unity.