

First Christmas Mass at Midnight

The Liturgical Year

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It is now time to offer the Great Sacrifice, and to call down our Emmanuel from heaven: he alone can fully pay the debt of gratitude which mankind owes to the Eternal Father. He will intercede for us on the Altar, as he did in his Crib. We will approach him with love, and he will give himself to us.

But such is the greatness of today's Mystery, that the Church is not satisfied with only once offering up the Holy Sacrifice. The long expected and precious Gift deserves an unusual welcome. God the Father has given his Son to us; and it is by the operation of the Holy Ghost that the grand Portent is produced: let there be, then, to the ever Blessed Three, the homage of a triple Sacrifice!

Besides, this Jesus, who is born tonight, is born thrice. He is born of the Blessed Virgin, in the stable of Bethlehem; he is born by grace, in the hearts of the Shepherds, who are the first fruits of the Christian Church; and he is born eternally from the Bosom of the Father, in the brightness of the Saints: to this triple Birth, therefore, let there be the homage of a triple Sacrifice!

The first Mass honours the Birth according to the Flesh, which, like the other two, is an effusion of the Divine Light. The hour is come: *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great Light: Light is risen to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death.* Outside the holy place, where we are now assembled, there is dark Night: material Night, caused by the absence of the sun; spiritual Night, by reason of the sins of men, who either sleep in the forgetfulness of God, or wake to the commission of crime. At Bethlehem, round the Stable, and in the City, all is deep darkness; and the inhabitants, who would not find room for the Divine Babe, are sleeping heavily: will they awaken when the Angels begin to sing?

Midnight comes. The Holy Virgin has been longing for this happy moment. Her heart is suddenly overwhelmed with a delight which is new even to her. She falls into an ecstasy of love. As her Child will one day, in his almighty power, rise through the unmoved barrier of his Sepulchre; so now, as a sunbeam gleaming through purest crystal, he is born, and lies on the ground before her. With arms outstretched to embrace her, and smiling upon her: this is her first sight of her Son, who is Son also of the Eternal Father! She adores — takes him into her arms-presses him to her heart-swathes his infant limbs — and lays him down in the manger.

Her faithful Joseph unites his adoration with hers; and so, too, do the Angels of heaven, for, the Royal Psalmist had sung this prophecy of their adoring him on his entrance into the world. Heaven opens over this spot of earth, which men call a Stable; and from it there mount to the Throne of the Eternal Father the first prayer, the first tear, the first sob of this his Son, our Jesus, who thus begins to prepare the world's salvation.

The eyes of the faithful are now riveted on the Sanctuary, where the same Jesus is to be their Holy Sacrifice. The procession of the sacred Ministers has entered the Holy of Holies, and the Priest comes with them to the foot of the Altar. The Choir is singing its opening canticle, the Introit; where we have our God himself speaking to his

Son, and saying: *This Day have I begotten thee*. Let the Nations rage, if they will, and be impatient of the yoke of this Babe of Bethlehem; he shall subdue them and reign over them, for he is the Son of God.

Introit

The Lord has said unto me: Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

Ps. Why have the nations raged, and the people devised vain things?

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

The Lord has said to me: Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee.

The Angelic Hymn is preceded by the Kyrie eleison: but these nine supplications for mercy over, it bursts forth with those sublime words: ***Gloria In Excelsis Deo; Et In Terra Pax Hominibus Bonae Voluntatis!***

Let us unite, heart and voice, in this the chant of the Angels: Glory be to God. Peace be to men. These our heavenly Brethren first intoned it, and they are, at this moment, round our Altar, as they were round the Crib; they are singing our happiness. They are adoring that divine Justice, which gave not a Redeemer to their fallen fellow angels, yet to us gives the very Son of God to be our Redeemer. They are magnifying that deep humiliation of him who made both Angels and men, and who so lovingly favours the weaker of the two. They know that our gratitude needs help, and so they lend us their sweet voices to give thanks to him who, by this mystery of love and magnificence, is enabling us poor mortals one day to fill up the thrones left vacant by the rebel spirits. Oh, yes; let us all, men and Angels, Church of earth and Church of heaven, let us sing: Glory be to God, and Peace to men! The more the Son of the Eternal Father has had to humble himself in order to enrich and exalt us, the more fervently must we cry out our warmest praise, and hymn this Mystery of the Incarnation: *Tu solus Sanctus, Tu solus Dominus, Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe* - Thou only, Oh Jesus art Holy, Thou only art Lord, Thou only art Most High.

The Collect then follows, summing up all our prayers in one.

Collect

Oh God, who hast enlightened this most sacred Night by the brightness of him who is the true Light: grant, we beseech thee, that we who have known the mysteries of this Light on earth, may likewise come to the enjoyment of it in heaven. Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.

Lesson of the Epistle of St Paul the Apostle to Titus. (Titus 2:11-15)

Dearly beloved, the grace of God our Saviour has appeared to all men, instructing us that denying ungodliness and worldly desires, we should live soberly and justly and godly in this world; looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ: who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and might cleanse to himself a people acceptable, a pursuer of good works. These things speak and exhort, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

This God our Saviour has at length appeared, and with such grace and mercy! He alone could deliver us from dead 'Works, and restore us to life. At this very hour, he appears to all men, laid in his narrow Crib, and fastly wrapped, as a Babe, in swaddling clothes. Yes, here have we the Blessed One, whose visit we had so long hoped

for! Let us purify our hearts, that he may be pleased with us; for though he is the Infant Jesus, he is also, as the Apostle has just told us, the Great God, and the Son of the Eternal Father, born from all eternity. Let us unite with the Angels and the Church in this hymn to our Great God, Jesus of Bethlehem.

Gradual

With thee is the principality in the day of thy strength, in the brightness of the Saints: from the womb, before the day-star, I begot thee.

V. The Lord said to my Lord: Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies my footstool.

Alleluia, alleluia.

V. The Lord has said to me: Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee.

Alleluia.

Gospel - Sequel of the holy Gospel according to Luke. (Luke2: 1-14)

At that time, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled. This enrolling was first made by Cyrenus, the governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his espoused wife, who was with child. And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped him up in swaddling-clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country Shepherds watching and keeping the night-watches over their flock. And behold an Angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear. And the Angel said to them: Fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people: for this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you: You shall find the Infant wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and laid in a manger. And suddenly there was with the Angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will.

Oh Divine Infant, we too must needs join our voices with those of the Angels, and sing with them: Glory be to God, and Peace to men! We cannot restrain our tears at hearing this history of thy Birth. We have followed thee in thy journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem; we have kept close to Mary and Joseph on the whole journey; we have kept sleepless watch during this holy Night, waiting thy coming. Praise be to thee, sweetest Jesus, for thy mercy, and love from all hearts for thy tender love of us! Our eyes are riveted on that dear Crib, for our Salvation is there; and there we recognize thee as the Messiah foretold in those sublime Prophecies which thy Spouse the Church has been repeating to us in her solemn prayers of this night. Thou art the *Mighty God — the Prince of Peace — the Spouse of our souls — our Peace — our Saviour — our Bread of Life*. And now what shall we offer thee? A good Will? Ah dear Lord, thou must form it within us; thou must increase it, if thou hast already given it; that thus, we may become thy Brethren by grace, as we already are by the human nature thou hast assumed. But, Oh Incarnate Word, this Mystery of thy becoming Man works within us a still higher grace: it makes us, as thy Apostle tells us, *partakers of that divine nature* which is inseparable from thee in the midst of all thy humiliations. Thou has made us less than the Angels in the scale of creation; but in thy Incarnation thou hast made us Heirs of God, and Joint Heirs with thine own divine Self! Never permit us, through our own weaknesses and sins, to degenerate from this wonderful gift, whereby thy Incarnation exalted us, and Oh dear Jesus, to what a height!

After the Gospel, the Church triumphantly chants the glorious symbol of our Faith, which tells, one by one, the Mysteries of the Man-God. At the words: *Et Incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine, ET HOMO FACTUS EST*, profoundly adore the great God who assumed our human nature, and became like unto us, his poor creatures; let your adoration and love repay him, if it were possible, for this his incomprehensible abasement. In each of today's Masses, when the Choir comes to these words in the Credo, the Priest rises from the sedilia, and remains kneeling in humble adoration at the foot of the Altar whilst they are being sung. You must unite your adorations with those of the Church, which is represented by the Celebrant.

During the Offering of the bread and wine, the Church tells us how the Birth of Jesus Christ filled heaven and earth with joy. In a few short moments there will be on our Altar, where we now see mere bread and wine, the Body and Blood of this same Jesus, our Emmanuel.

Offertory

Let the heavens rejoice, and the earth be glad in the presence of the Lord, for he is come.

Secret

Receive, Oh Lord, the offerings we make to thee on this present solemnity: that by thy grace, through the intercourse of these sacred mysteries, we may be conformable to him in whom our nature is united to thine. Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.

The Preface then gives expression to the thanksgiving of the people, and finishes with the triple Sanctus to the God of Sabaoth. At the Elevation, when, in the midst of the mysterious silence, your Saviour, the Incarnate Word, descends upon the Altar, you must see, with the eye of your faith, the Crib, and Jesus stretching out his hands to his Eternal Father, and looking upon you with extreme tenderness, and Mary adoring him with a Mother's love, and Joseph looking on and weeping with joy, and the holy Angels lost in amazement at the mystery. You must give your heart to the New-Born Babe, that he may fill it with what he wishes to see there; nay, beg of him to fill it with himself, and make himself its Master and its All. After the Communion, the Church, which has just been united to the Infant God by partaking of the sacred mysteries, once more celebrates the Eternal Generation of that Divine Word, who was born from the Bosom of the Father before any creature existed, and who has appeared to the world this Night before the Day-Star has risen.

Communion

In the brightness of the Saints, from the womb, before the day-star, I begot thee.

The Church terminates this her first Sacrifice, by praying for the grace of indissoluble union with the Saviour who is born to her.

Postcommunion

Grant, we beseech thee, Oh Lord our God, that we, who celebrate with joy the Birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, by partaking of these sacred mysteries, may, by a worthy conduct of life, come to be united with him. Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.

The sacred Night is passing quickly on; and will soon bring us to the Second Mass, which is to sanctify the hour of day-break, or the Aurora. Every day in the year, the Church passes the hour before Sunrise in prayer, for the rising of the Sun is a beautiful figure of the mystery of Jesus' coming to this earth to give it light. This portion of the Divine Office is called Lauds, on account of its being wholly made up of praise and joy. On Christmas Day, however, she somewhat anticipates the usual hour, in order that she may begin, at the precise time of the Aurora, a more perfect and more divine Sacrifice of Praise — the Eucharistic Oblation, which satisfies all the obligations we owe to the Divine bounty.

The Office of Lauds is celebrated with the same solemnity as that of Vespers; and altogether, the two Offices are much alike. Both of them tell us of the Divine Sun of Justice; Lauds celebrates his glorious rising, whilst Vespers which are said at sunset, when the shades of evening are beginning to fall upon the earth, remind us how we must long for that eternal Day which shall have no night, and whose Lamp is the Lamb. Lauds are the morning. Vespers the evening incense. The mysteries of the liturgical day begin with the first, and end with the second.