

# Holy Mass of Christmas Eve

## The Liturgical Year

### Dom Prosper Gueranger

‘At length,’ says St. Peter Damian, in his sermon for this holy eve, ‘at length we have come from the stormy sea into the tranquil port; hitherto it was the promise, now it is the prize; hitherto labour, now rest; hitherto despair, now hope; hitherto the way, now our home. The heralds of the divine promise came to us; but they gave us nothing but rich promises. Hence our psalmist himself grew wearied and slept, and, with a seemingly reproachful tone, thus sings his lamentation to God: “But Thou hast rejected and despised us; Thou hast deferred the coming of Thy Christ.” At another time he assumes a tone of command and thus prays: “Oh Thou that sits upon the Cherubim, show Thyself!” Seated on Thy high throne, with myriads of adoring angels around Thee, look down upon the children of men, who are victims of that sin, which was committed indeed by Adam, but permitted by Thy justice. Remember what my substance is; Thou did make it to the likeness of Thine own; for though every living man is vanity, yet inasmuch as he is made to Thy image, he is not a passing vanity. Bend Thy heavens and come down, and turn the eyes of Thy mercy upon us Thy miserable suppliants, and forget us not unto the end!’

Isaiah, also, in the vehemence of his desire, thus spoke: “For Sion’s sake I will not hold my peace, and for the sake of Jerusalem I will not rest, till her Just One come forth as brightness. Oh, that thou would rend the heavens, and would come down!” So, too, all the prophets, tired of the long delay of the coming, have prayed to Thee, now with supplication, now with lamentation, and now with cries of impatience. We have listened to these their prayers; we have made use of them as our own, and now, nothing can give us joy or gladness, till our Saviour come to us, and, kissing us with the kiss of His lips, say to us : “I have heard and granted your prayers.”

But, what is this that has been said to us: “Sanctify yourselves, Oh ye children of Israel, and be ready; for on the morrow the Lord will come down”? We are, then, but one half day and night from the grand visit, the admirable birth of the Infant God! Hurry on your course, ye fleeting hours, that we may the sooner see the Son of God in His crib, and pay our homage to this world saving birth. You, brethren, are the children of Israel, that are sanctified, and cleansed from every defilement of soul and body, ready, by your earnest devotion, for to morrow’s mysteries. Such, indeed, you are, if I may judge from the manner in which you have spent these sacred days of preparation for the coming of your Saviour.

‘But if, notwithstanding all your care, some drops of the stream of this life’s frailties are still on your hearts, wipe them away and cover them with the snow-white robe of confession. This I can promise you from the mercy of the divine Infant: he that shall confess his sins and be sorry for them, shall have born within him the Light of the world; the darkness that deceived him shall be dispelled; and he shall enjoy the brightness of the true Light. For how can mercy be denied to the miserable this night, in which the merciful and compassionate Lord is so mercifully born? Therefore, drive away from you all haughty looks, and idle words, and unjust works; let your loins be girt, and your feet walk in the right paths; and then come, and accuse the Lord, if this night He rend not the heavens, and come down to you, and throw all your sins into the depths of the sea.’

This holy eve is, indeed, a day of grace and hope, and we ought to spend it in spiritual joy. The Church, contrary to her general practice, prescribes that, if Christmas Eve fall on a Sunday, the fasting alone shall be anticipated

on the Saturday; but that the Office and Mass of the vigil should take precedence of the Office and Mass of the fourth Sunday of Advent. How solemn, then, in the eyes of the Church, are these few 'hours, which separate us from the great feast! On all other feasts, no matter how great they may be, the solemnity begins with first Vespers, and until then the Church restrains her joy, and celebrates the Divine Office and Sacrifice according to the Lenten rite. Christmas, on the contrary, seems to begin with the vigil; and one would suppose that this morning's Lauds were the opening of the feast; for the solemn intonation of this portion of the Office, is that of a double, and the antiphons are sung before and after each psalm or canticle. The purple vestments are used at the Mass, but all the genuflections peculiar to the Advent ferias are omitted; and only one Collect is said, instead of the three usually said when the Mass is not that of a solemnity.

Let us enter into the spirit of the Church, and prepare ourselves, in all the joy of our hearts, to meet the Saviour who is coming to us. Let us observe with strictness the fast which is prescribed; it will enable our bodies to aid the promptness of our spirit. Let us delight in the thought that, before we again lie down to rest, we shall have seen Him born, in the solemn midnight, who comes to give light to every creature. For surely it is the duty of every faithful child of the Catholic Church to celebrate with her this happy night, when, in spite of all the coldness of devotion, the whole universe keeps up its watch for the arrival of its Saviour. It is one of the last vestiges of the piety of ancient days, and God forbid it should ever be effaced!

Let us, in a spirit of prayer, look at the principal portions of the Office of this beautiful vigil. First, then, the Church makes a mysterious announcement to her children. It serves as the Invitatory of Matins, and as the Introit and Gradual of the Mass. They are the words which Moses addressed to the people of God when he told them of the heavenly manna, which they would receive on the morrow. We, too, are expecting our Manna, our Jesus, the Bread of life, who is to be born in Bethlehem, which is the house of Bread.

### **Invitatory**

*This day ye shall know that the Lord will come, and in the morning ye shall see his glory.*

The responsories are full of sublimity and sweetness. Nothing can be more affecting than their lyric melody, sung to us by our mother the Church, on the very night which precedes the night of Jesus' birth.

**R.** *Sanctify yourselves this day, and be ye ready: for on the morrow ye shall see the Majesty of God amongst you.*

**V.** *This day ye shall know that the Lord will come, and in the morning ye shall see the Majesty of God amongst you.*

**R.** *Be ye constant; ye shall see the help of the Lord upon you: fear not, Judea and Jerusalem: To-morrow ye shall go forth, and the Lord shall be with you:*

**V.** *Sanctify yourselves, ye children of Israel, and be ye ready. Tomorrow ye shall go forth, and the Lord shall be with you.*

**R.** *Sanctify yourselves, ye children of Israel, says the Lord: for on the morrow, the Lord shall come down: And shall take from you all that is languid.*

**V.** *Tomorrow the iniquity of the earth shall be cancelled, and over us shall reign the Saviour of the world. And he shall take from you all that is languid.*

At the Office of Prime, in cathedral chapters and monasteries, the announcement of tomorrow's feast is made with unusual solemnity. The lector, who frequently is one of the dignitaries of the choir, sings, to a magnificent chant, the following lesson from the martyrology. All the assistants remain standing during it, until the lector comes to the word Bethlehem, at which all genuflect, and continue in that posture until all the glad tidings are told.

### **The Night of the Calends Of January**

The year from the creation of the world, when in the beginning God created heaven and earth, five thousand one hundred and ninety-nine: from the deluge, the year two thousand nine hundred and fifty-seven: from the birth of Abraham, the year two thousand and fifteen: from Moses and the going out of the people of Israel from Egypt, the year one thousand five hundred and ten: from David's being anointed king, the year one thousand and thirty-two: in the sixty-fifth week according to the prophecy of Daniel: in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad: from the building of the city of Rome, the year seven hundred and fifty two: in the forty-second year of the reign of Octavian Augustus: the whole world being in peace: in the sixth age of the world: Jesus Christ, the eternal God, and Son of the eternal Father, wishing to consecrate this world by his most merciful coming, being conceived of the Holy Ghost, and nine months since his conception having passed, in Bethlehem of Juda, is born of the Virgin Mary, being made Man: **THE NATIVITY OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST ACCORDING TO THE FLESH!**

Thus have passed before us, in succession, all the generations of the world. Each of them is asked if it has seen Him whom we are expecting, and each is silent; until the name of Mary is pronounced, and then is proclaimed the Nativity of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made Man. St. Bernard, speaking of this announcement, says: 'The voice of joy has gone forth in our land, the voice of rejoicing and of salvation is in the tabernacles of the just. There has been heard a good word, a word that gives consolation, a word that is full of gladness, a word worthy of all acceptance. Resound with praise, ye mountains, and all ye trees of the forests clap your hands before the face of the Lord, for He is coming.

Hearken, Oh ye heavens, and give ear, Oh earth, be astounded and give praise, Oh all ye creatures, but thou, Oh man, more than all they! **JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDA !**

Who is there that is so hard of heart, that this word does not touch him? Could anything be told us sweeter than this? Could any news delight us like this? Was such a thing ever heard, or anything like it ever told to the world? **JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDA!**

Oh brief word of the Word abridged, and yet how full of heavenly beauty! The heart, charmed with the honeyed sweetness of the expression, would fain diffuse it and spread it out into more words; but no, it must be given just as it is, or you spoil it: **JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD, IS BORN IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDA!**'

### **MASS**

#### **Introit**

*This day ye shall know that the Lord will come, and save us: and in the morning ye shall see his glory.*

*Ps. The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world and all that dwell therein.*

*V. 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*

*This day ye shall know that the Lord will come, and save us: and in the morning ye shall see his glory.*

In the Collect, the Church makes a last allusion to the coming of Jesus as our Judge at the end of the world. But after this, she can look upon her Jesus only as the Prince of peace, and as the Spouse who comes to her. Her children must imitate her confidence.

### **Collect**

*Oh God, who makes us rejoice in the yearly expectation of the feast of our redemption: grant that we who joyfully receive thy only begotten Son as a Redeemer, may also Him coming as our Judge, the same our Lord Jesus Christ Thy Son: Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.*

In the Epistle, the apostle St. Paul, addressing himself to the Romans, makes known to them the dignity and holiness of the Gospel, that is, of those good tidings, which the angels are to bring to us this very night. Now, the subject of this Gospel is Jesus, the Son that is born unto God, of the family of David, according to the flesh. This Jesus comes that He may be to His Church the source of grace and apostleship. It is by these two gifts that we are still associated, after so many ages, to the joys of the great mystery of His birth in Bethlehem.

### **Epistle - Lesson of the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Romans. (Romans 1: 1-6)**

*Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle separated unto the Gospel of God, which he had promised before by his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was made to him of the seed of David according to the flesh, who was predestinated the Son of God in power, according to the spirit of sanctification by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead: by whom we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith in all nations for his name, among whom are you also the called of Jesus Christ our Lord.*

### **Gradual**

*This day ye shall know that the Lord will come, and save us: and in the morning ye shall see his glory.*

*V. Thou who rules Israel, hearken: thou who leads Joseph like a sheep: thou who site on the Cherubim, show thyself to Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasses.*

The Gospel of today's Mass is the passage which related the trouble of St. Joseph and the visit he received from the angel. This incident, which forms one of the preludes to the birth of our Saviour, could not but enter into the liturgy for Advent; and so far, there was no suitable occasion for its insertion. The vigil of Christmas was the right day for this Gospel, for another reason: the angel, in speaking to St. Joseph, tells him that the name to be given to the Child of Mary is Jesus, which signifies that He will *save His people from their sins*.

### **Gospel - Sequel of the holy Gospel according to Matthew. (Matthew 1: 18-21)**

*When Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing publicly to expose her, was minded to put her away privately. But while he thought on these things behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived*

*in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a Son: and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins.*

### **Offertory**

*Lift up your gates, Oh ye princes, and be ye lifted up, Oh eternal gates; and the King of glory shall enter in.*

### **Secret**

*Grant, we beseech thee, Oh almighty God, that as we celebrate the eve of the adorable birth of thy Son; we may one day receive with joy his eternal rewards. Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.*

During the Communion, the Church expresses her joy at receiving, in the Eucharistic Sacrament, Him whose flesh purifies and nourishes ours. She is strengthened by the consolation given to her by the divine Food, to wait yet a little longer for that happy moment, in which angels will come and invite her to the crib of the Messiah.

### **Communion**

*The glory of the Lord shall be revealed: and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.*

### **Postcommunion**

*Grant us, we beseech thee, Oh Lord, relief by celebrating the birth of thy only Son, whose sacred mystery is our meat and drink. Through the same Jesus Christ, Thy Son, our Lord, Who lives and reigns with Thee in the unity of the Holy Ghost, God, forever and ever.*

The Ambrosian and Mozarabic liturgies have nothing in their Office and Mass for this vigil which we deem telling enough for insertion here. In the anthology of the Greeks there is a hymn, which will assist our devotion, and from which we take the following stanzas. It is called: The beginning of the Hours of the Nativity: Terce, Sext, and None.

### **Hymn For The Vigil Of Christmas**

**(Taken from the Anthology of the Greeks)**

*On a certain day, there was enrolled at Bethlehem together with the old man Joseph, as being of the family of David, Mary, who bore in her virginal womb the divine fruit. The time of her delivery was come, and there was no place in the inn; and instead of a splendid palace for the Queen there was but a cave.*

*The moment has come for the accomplishment of the mystic prophecy: 'And thou Bethlehem, land of Juda, art not the least among the princes, for thou art the first to adorn the cave. For there shall come to me from thee the leader of the nations, born of a Virgin Maid according to the flesh; it is Christ, who is God, and he shall rule his new people of Israel.' Let us all give him highest praise.*

*This is our God, and there is none other; he was born of a Virgin, and he conversed with men; the only begotten Son becomes mortal, and is laid in a poor crib; the Lord of glory is wrapped in swaddling clothes; the star invites the Magi to adore him, and let us sing: Oh holy Trinity, save our souls!*

*Come, all ye faithful: let us be transported with divine enthusiasm; let us look at God coming in a visible form from on high and descending into Bethlehem; then raising up our minds, let us bring to him our virtues as the myrrh we offer him, thus preparing, with faith, for his birth among us: let us sing, Glory in the highest be to God, one in three Persons, whose goodwill to man is thus made manifest, for thou, Oh Jesus, the Lover of man, hast redeemed Adam and restored the work of thy hands!*

*Hear, Oh ye heavens, and give ear, Oh earth! Let the foundations of the earth be moved, and all the earth tremble: for God the maker of man has himself put on a created form, and he whose creative hand upheld his creatures, has, by mercy moved, clothed himself with a body. Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgements, and how unsearchable his ways!*

*Oh come, ye Christian people, let us see the prodigy that stupefies all thought and holds it in suspense; then let us devoutly adore, and sing our hymns with hearts full of faith. This day there has come to Bethlehem a Maid that is to give birth to God! Choirs of angels are already there! Joseph, her spouse, seeing her, has already received the answer to his question: What is this mystery which I see in thee, pure Virgin! How can thou bring forth, that never hast borne a mother's humiliation!*

*This day, there is born of a Virgin, he that holds in his hand the whole creation. He whose very essence is to be intangible, has become mortal and is bound in swathing bands. He who, of old, in the beginning, poised and set the heavens, is laid in a manger. He who rained down manna on his people in the desert, is fed with milk at his Mother's breast. The Spouse of the Church invites the Magi; the Son of the Virgin accepts their gifts. We adore thy Nativity, Oh Jesus, show unto us thy divine manifestations.*

Let us contemplate our blessed Lady, and her faithful spouse Joseph, leaving the city of Jerusalem, and continuing their journey to Bethlehem, which they reach after a few hours. In obedience to the will of heaven, they immediately repair to the place where their names are to be enrolled, as the emperor's edict requires. There is entered in the public register, Joseph, a carpenter of Nazareth in Galilee. To his name, there is, doubtless, added that of Mary, spouse of the above named Joseph. Perhaps they enter her as a young woman, in the ninth month of her pregnancy. And this is all! Oh Incarnate Word! Thou art not yet counted by men! Thou art upon this earth of Thine, and men set Thee down as nothing! And yet, all this excitement of the enrolment of the world is to be for nothing else but this, that Mary, Thy august Mother, may come to Bethlehem, and there give Thee birth!

Oh ineffable mystery, how grand is this apparent littleness! How mighty this divine weakness! But God has still lower to descend than merely coming on our earth. He goes from house to house of His people: not one will receive Him. He must go and seek a crib in the stable of poor dumb beasts. There, until such time as the angels sing to Him their hymn, and the shepherds and the Magi come with their offerings, He will meet 'the ox that knows its Owner, and the ass that knows its Master's crib!' Oh Saviour of men, Emmanuel, Jesus, we, too, will go to this stable of Bethlehem. Thy new birth, which is tonight, shall not be without loving and devoted hearts to bless it. At this very hour, Thou art knocking at the doors of Bethlehem, and who is there that will take Thee in? Thou says to my soul in the words of the Canticle: 'Open to me, my sister, my beloved! for my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the night !' Ah! sweet Jesus! Thou shall not be refused here! I beseech Thee, enter my house. I have been watching and longing for Thee. Come, then, Lord Jesus! come !