

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Song of the day:

Adoro Te

G. K. Chesterton once said in his bluff way that the Catholic faith was a thick steak, a bottle of stout, and a good cigar. It was a eucharistic sentiment, just as when his friend Hillaire Belloc wrote these jaunty and immortal words:

*Wherever the Catholic sun doth shine,
There's always laughter and good red wine.
At least I've always found it so –
Benedicamus Domino!*

What a shame it is then, that as far as the music of our churches goes, it's a fast food hamburger, a can of diet soda, and a wad of bubble gum. That's assuming that the songs haven't been lying out in a heretical sun too long, in which case you may have to rush out of church with your hand over your mouth.

I like to talk about hymns. That's not because I am a virtuoso. It's because "singing is what the lover does," as Josef Pieper says, and "he who sings prays twice," as Augustine says, and music will make up your soul, as Plato says. If you sing the hymns of a fool or a slob or a sissy, then that is what you will become. It's like a law of spiritual biology. You can't put your mind in one box and your heart in another. Human beings aren't made like that. An old saying puts it, *lex orandi, lex*

credendi, the law of praying is the law of believing. As you pray, so shall you come to believe. So I am going to come up with my own saying here, inspired by that one. It is: *Mos cantandi, mos amandi*: your customs in song will become your customs in love.

You may remember the story of Narcissus, who pined away to nothing when he fell in love with a beautiful face. It was his own, which he saw in a pool of water. So if you want to become a religious Narcissus, staring into a shallow pool and pretending to see Jesus smiling back at you, keep singing songs that Narcissus would sing. Sing songs

about how wonderful you are. If you want to become breathless and brainless, sing silly and empty songs that are fit for kindergarten kids at a summer camp – though even there, half of the boys will roll their eyes and look for an escape.

Here's a stanza from a real hymn, *Adoro Te*, written in Latin by Saint Thomas Aquinas, and translated into English by the Victorian poet and priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Thomas is moved in his mind and his heart by the mystery of the Eucharist, that God should be "here in hiding," yet here really, totally, though our senses cannot perceive it. We cannot see Jesus in the Eucharistic host, nor touch Him, nor taste Him: all those senses, says Thomas, will be deceived. Only *hearing* is up to the task: hearing that the Lord, who is Truth himself, has said it.

Were there other times when the divinity of the

The image shows a musical score for the hymn 'Adoro Te'. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a common time signature (C). The melody is written on a five-line staff. Below the first staff, the Latin lyrics are written: '-dó-ro te devó-te, la-tens Dé- i-tas, Quæ sub his'. The second staff continues the melody, and below it are the Latin lyrics: 'fi-gú-ris ve-re lá-ti-tas: Ti-bi se cor me- um to-tum'. The third staff concludes the melody, and below it are the Latin lyrics: 'súb-ji-cit Qui- a te contém-plans to-tum dé- fi- cit.' The score is presented in a clean, black-and-white format with a serif font for the lyrics.

Lord was hidden? Calvary was one:

*On the cross thy Godhead
Made no sign to men;
Here thy very manhood
Steals from human ken.
Both are my confession,
Both are my belief,
And I pray the prayer
Of the dying thief.*

Think of it. When Jesus was nailed to the tree, who among all the people present could say, “This man is God”? But

somehow the truth came to the repentant thief, and Jesus said to him, “This day you shall be with me in Paradise.” When the sacrifice of Calvary is reenacted at the Mass, we see even less than what the thief saw. Our eyes miss not only the divinity of Christ in the bread and wine, but the manhood too. Yet we believe both, because we trust in Him and His word. We make our own bold confession. Not as proud peacocks, cawing and whooping, but as people in the same situation as that of the thief. Did he deserve that the Lord should come to him in his sin? No, and we don’t deserve it in ours, either. The thief would never have seen on his own that Jesus was God. It was God’s grace that cleared his eyes. We too would never know that the Lord was present in the sacrament. So we too, guilty as we are, should pray the prayer of the thief, that the Lord should remember us when He comes into His kingdom.

There was another man who should have seen Jesus, but he wouldn’t trust his friends or his own

eyes. What is it like to be in the presence of Jesus and yet somehow to miss Him, because we are weak, and our trust is small? It is to be like one of the apostles, the Saint Thomas who wouldn’t believe that Jesus had risen from the dead, unless he actually *touched* the Lord’s wounds:

*I am not like Thomas,
Wounds I cannot see,
But can plainly call Thee
Lord and God as he;
This faith each day deeper
Be my holding of;
Daily make me harder
Hope, and dearer love.*

“Our eyes miss not only the divinity of Christ in the bread and wine, but the manhood too. Yet we believe both, because we trust in Him and His word.”

What a grace, to have Jesus Himself guide your hand to probe the wound in His side! We are not given that grace, but like Thomas we can break out into a bold profession of faith, and cry, “My Lord and my God!” We can do that, but we should never rest on our own poor power. We pray instead that God will work a wonder of grace in us that is like what He did in the flesh for Thomas: to take the hands of our intellect and our heart to touch His flesh, making our faith more profound, our grip upon the anchor of hope more firm, and our love more dear.

Sing it, my friends. *Mos cantandi, mos amandi.*



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts is a joyfully Catholic, great books college located on a mountain in beautiful New Hampshire. The college offers a transformative liberal education of the whole person, ordered to human flourishing and communion, animated by the perennial questions, given shape by the classic books, and nourished by a vibrant liturgical and sacramental culture. Magdalen College calls all within her community to enter the great conversation of authors seeking wisdom that has unfolded across the ages, cultivating a life of virtue, poetic imagination, service, and life-giving fidelity.