

Benediction Hymns

THERE IS A wonderful revival in singing the beautiful Benediction hymns in Latin. It is re-opening the riches of the Church's perennial music, indeed, its preferred music, Gregorian chant.

This augers well for the gradual re-introduction of singing the people's chants of the Mass, namely the *Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Pater noster* and *Agnus Dei* — as well as their responses to the priest, while keeping much else in English, as taught by Vatican II in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* §54.

Non-Latin worshippers, of course, need the support of literal translations with the Latin.

THE BENEDICTION HYMN *TANTUM ERGO*

Tantum ergo sacramentum (literally, "So great therefore a sacrament") is the last two stanzas of *Pange lingua gloriosus corporis mysterium* ("Sing, tongue, of the glorious body the mystery") by St Thomas Aquinas, 1227-1274.

Pange lingua is one of five hymns he composed "at the request of Pope Urban IV on the occasion of the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi in 1264.

"The hymns of the Angelic Doctor are remarkable for their smoothness and clearness, and for their logical conciseness and dogmatic precision."

Thus wrote Father Matthew Britt O.S.B. in *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* (henceforth cited as 'Britt') in 1924, on p. 173.

"The *Pange lingua* is preeminently the hymn of the Most Blessed Sacrament. It is the most beautiful of the great Eucharistic hymns of St Thomas. 'This hymn,' says Dr Neale, 'contests the second place among those of the Western Church with the *Vexilla Regis*, the *Stabat Mater*, the *Iesu dulcis memoria*, the *Ad regias Agni dapes*, the *Ad Supernam*, and one or two others, leaving the *Dies Iroë* in its unapproachable glory.'" (Britt, p. 184)

St Thomas began the *Pange lingua* using the opening words from the Passiontide hymn of Venantius Fortunatus (530-609), *Pange Lingua gloriosi, proelium certaminis*, "Sing, tongue, the battle of the glorious contest (i.e. between Christ and Satan)."

- Like Fortunatus, St Thomas used easy Latin to express the rich piety found in Tradition and Scripture.
- Like Fortunatus, he used trochees (not iambs) with six line stanzas of 8 7 8 7 8 7 syllables.
- Unlike Fortunatus, he sustained this rhythm so perfectly that *not a single syllable* needs elision to preserve the metre. This is rare in Latin hymns.
- Unlike Fortunatus, he *never* requires singing against the accentation. Again, this is a rarity in Latin hymns.
- Unlike Fortunatus, whose great hymn rhymes only accidentally here and there, St Thomas sustains a rhyming pattern *ab.ab.ab* faultlessly through six stanzas.
- Unlike Fortunatus, his hymn never attracted any tinkering by ecclesiastical editors. Nor should it. It would be an insult to the superb purity of its poetry.
- Finally, note how often Fortunatus and St Thomas get every vowel sound into so many pairs of lines.

How rarely is this poetic genius of St Thomas Aquinas ever matched by other hymnists!

DON'T SPOIL IT!

Before Vatican II, singing at parish Benediction suffered certain faults from zeal and ignorance. For instance, there was an **untidy, inelegant and unnecessary** elision of certain syllables when singing Samuel Webbe's well-known and beautiful tune for the *Tantum ergo*. Those singing systematically elided the second last syllable and added its note(s) to those assigned to the third last.

The last two syllables in the second, fourth and sixth lines of the first stanza of *Tantum Ergo* are made up of two vowels. These vowels, 'u-i' in *rit-u-i, cern-u-i, de-fec-tu-i*, should not be merged into the English sound 'we'. Elision, of course, is allowable in words like *cui* "to whom, to which", when a less-than-perfect metre reduces it to one syllable 'kwee'. And some words like 'lingua' are never pronounced any other way than 'ling-gwa', in two syllables. But such exceptions only prove the rule.

And similarly with 'i-o' in the second stanza: *ju-bil-at-i-o, ben-e-dict-i-o, lau-dat-i-o*. These separate sounds 'i-o' should not be merged into the single English sound 'tso'.

Such elisions change the metre from 87.87.87 to 86.86.86. This shows little respect for the poetic genius of its author, St Thomas Aquinas, let alone for the musical skill of Samuel Webbe.

Never elide syllables contrary to the composer.

Never elide syllables in what is already perfect poetry!

EARLIER STANZAS OF *PANGE LINGUA*

- The sort of elisions made mistakenly in stanzas 5 & 6 would be monstrous in stanzas 2, 3 & 4. Here, the final syllables are not simple vowels. We cannot merge the last two syllables of *Vir-gin-e, sem-in-e, ord-in-e; frat-ri-bus, le-gal-i-bus, man-i-bus; ef-fi-cit, de-fi-cit, suf-fi-cit*. Therefore we should not sing the last stanzas in a way we cannot sing the others.
- Further, there is no other tune for *Tantum ergo* which is ever corrupted by elisions.
- And what is more, Webbe's tune never suffers corruption by elisions in English. (Here, in passing, admire the felicity of the English translators).
- Local custom is no excuse for continuing bad singing in Latin.
- Finally, bad habits are catching and sometimes transferred to *O Salutaris Hostia*. We must never merge 'i-u' in *os-ti-um* and *au-xil-i-um*, or 'i-a' in *glor-i-a* and *pa-tri-a*.
- Let us mend any faulty singing habits!

BREAKING BAD HABITS

- Read the words aloud before singing them. Hear just how awful those elisions really sound! And how they butcher the metre!
- Try singing the entire hymn *Pange lingua* at Benediction, not just the last two stanzas, *Tantum ergo*. This is actually the first option in the *Novus Ordo* Benediction.
- Sing it to other tunes, such as the tune named *Pange lingua* which is suggested for processions of the Blessed Sacrament.

Parish tune for *O SALUTARIS HOSTIA* by Samuel Webbe

O sa-lu-tar-is Hos-ti-a Quae cae-li pan-dis es-ti-um Bel
 U-ni-tri-no-que Dom-i-no Sit semp-ter-na glo-ri-a Qui
 -la pre-munt hos-ti-li-a Da ro-bur fer aux-i-li-um A-men
 vi-tam si-ne ter-mi-no No-bis do-net in pa-tri-a

Parish tune for *TANTUM ERGO SACRAMENTUM* by Samuel Webbe

Tan-tum er-go Sa-cra-men-tum Ve-ne-re-mur cer-nu-i
 Ge-ni-to-ri Ge-ni-to-que Laus et ju-bi-la-ti-o
 Et an-ti-quum do-cu-men-tum No-vo ce-dat ri-tu-i
 Sa-lus ho-nor vir-tus quo-que Sit et be-ne-di-cti-o
 Prae-stet fi-des sup-ple-men-tum Sen-su-um de-fec-tu-i A-men
 Pro-ce-den-ti ab u-tro-que Com-par sit lau-da-ti-o

PRONUNCIATIONS

O SALUTARIS HOSTIA, (OH SAL-OO-TAR-ISS HOS-TEE-AH)
 Quae caeli pandas ostium, (KWAY CHAYLEE ... OSS-TEE-OOM)
 Bella premunt hostilia, (...PRAY-MOONT HOST-ILL-EE-AH)
 Da robur, fer auxilium. (DA ROH-BER FAIR OW-XIL-EE-OOM)

Uni trinoque Domino, (...TRIN-OH-KWAY...)
 Sit sempiterna Gloria, (...GLOR-EE-AH)
 Qui vitam sine termino, (KWEE...SEE-NAY...)
 Nobis donet in patria. (...PAH-TREE-AH)

TANTUM ERGO SACRAMENTUM

Veneremur cernui, (VEN-ER-AY-MOOR CHURN-OO-EE)
 Et antiquum documentum
 Novo cedat ritui: (NOVO CHAY-DART RIT-OO-EE)
 Praestet fides supplementum (PRAY-STET FEE-DAYS...)
 Sensuum defectui. (...DAY-FEC-TOO-EE)

Genitori, Genitoque (JENNI-TOR-EE JENNI-TOE-KWAY)
 Laus et jubilatio, (LOW-S ET YOO-BILL-ART-SEE-OH (OW as in crowd))
 Salus, honor, virtus quoque (...VEER-TOOS KWOH-KWAY)
 Sit et benedictio; (SIT ET BEN-EH-DIX-SEE-OH)
 Procedenti ab utroque (PRO-CHAY-DEN-TEE ARB OO-TRO-KWAY)
 Compar sit laudatio. (...LOW-DART-SEE-OH) Amen.

Usual translation for Benediction

DOWN IN ADORATION falling
 This great Sacrament we hail;
 Ancient types have long departed
 Newer rites of grace prevail,
 Faith for all defects supplying
 Where the feeble senses fail.

Glory let us give and blessing
 To the Father and the Son,
 Honour, might and praise addressing
 While eternal ages run,
 Equal praise to Him confessing
 Who proceeds from Both as One. Amen

SING my tongue the Saviour's glory,
 Of His Flesh the mystery sing:
 Of the Blood all price exceeding
 Shed by our immortal King,
 Destined for the world's redemption,
 From a noble womb to spring.

Of a pure and spotless Virgin
 Born for us on earth below,
 He, as man with man conversing,
 Stayed, the seeds of truth to sow;
 Then He closed in solemn order
 Wondrously His life of woe.

On the night of that Last Supper,
 Seated with His chosen band,
 He the Paschal Victim eating,
 First fulfils the law's command;
 Then, as food to His apostles,
 Gives Himself with His own hand.

Word made flesh, the bread of nature
 By His word to flesh He turns;
 Wine into His blood He changes:
 What though sense no change discerns?
 Only to be the heart in earnest,
 Faith her lesson quickly learns.

DOWN IN ADORATION falling
 Lo, the Sacred Host we hail;
 Lo, o'er ancient forms departing
 Newer rites of grace prevail;
 Faith for all defects supplying
 Where the feeble senses fail.

To the Everlasting Father
 And the Son Who reigns on high,
 With the Holy Ghost proceeding
 Forth from each eternally,
 Be salvation, honour, blessing,
 Might and endless majesty. Amen

PANGE LINGUA gloriosi
 Corporis mysterium,
 Sanguisque pretiosi,
 Quem in mundi pretium
 Fructus ventris generosi
 Rex effudit gentium.

Nobis datus, nobis natus
 Ex intacta Virgine,
 Et in mundo conversatus,
 Sparso verbi semine,
 Sui moras incolatus
 Miro clausit ordine.

In supreme noctae cenae
 Recumbens cum fratribus,
 Observata lege plene
 Cibis in legalibus,
 Cibus turbae duodenae
 Se dat suis manibus.

Verbum caro panem verum
 Verbo carnem efficit;
 Fitque sanguis Christi Merum;
 Et si sensus deficit,
 Ad firmandum cor sincerum
 Sola fides sufficit

TANTUM ergo Sacramentum
 Veneremur cernui;
 Et antiquum documentum
 Novo cedat ritui:
 Praestet fides supplementum
 Sensuum defectui.

Genitori, Genitoque
 Laus et jubilatio,
 Salus, honor, virtus quoque
 Sit et benedictio;
 Procedenti ab utroque
 Compar sit laudatio. Amen.