



The Traditional Catholic Liturgy

Adapted from *The Liturgical Year* by Abbot Gueranger

[...] [T]he theme of Jesus' Birth as the rising of the Sun of Justice is signified by this very day—December 25 being the first, after the winter solstice, when the sun shines noticeably longer. He is also the Light of the World, so it is not surprising that this theme is mentioned, not only in the Mass of the Aurora, but also in many ancient liturgies from throughout the Christian world.

Prudentius, the prince of Christian poets, wrote this Christmas hymn near the turn of the fifth century:

Why is it that the Sun, which rises today, leaves his narrow path? Is it not that there is born on our earth Christ, Who comes to widen the way of Light?

Ah, how speedily did the rapid Day turn his sweet face from us! How, each time, shorter was his stay, preparing us for total night!

But now let the heavens wear brighter looks, and the glad earth be happy, for the Sun begins once more to mount the longer path.

Dear Infant Jesus, all things, however hard and senseless, feel that Thou art born: the very stones relent, and verdure comes from rocks.

The flinty mountainside drips now with honey; the oak's stiff trunk now sweats its sappy tears; and balsam oozes now from the humblest shrub.

How holy is Thy cradle-crib, O King eternal! How sacred ever to mankind! Nay, the very Ox and Ass stand over it as their own!

St. Ephrem wrote this hymn for the Church in Syria, the country nearest to that where the Great Event took place:

The Son of God is born—Light has shone forth, darkness has fled from the earth, and the world is enlightened; let it praise the New-Born Babe, that gave it light.

He has risen from the Virgin's womb; the shades of night have seen Him and fled; the darkness of error has been scattered; let the whole earth sing praise to Him, by Whom it has been illumined.

The holy Roman Church, by the mouth of St. Leo the Great, in his Sacramentary, thus celebrates the mystery of the divine Light:

It is truly meet and just, right and salutary, that we should give thanks to Thee, O Eternal God: because this day has risen the true Light of our Savior, whereby all things are made clear to our intellect and sight: that thus by His own brightness He might not only direct us in this our present life, but bring us to the very vision of Thy divine Majesty.

And again, the same Church thus invokes upon Her children the Light of Christ: She uses the words of the Sacramentary of St. Gregory the Great:

Grant unto us, O Almighty God, that the Savior Whom Thou dost send for the world's salvation on this day's solemnity, whereon the heavens are renewed in light, may ever rise in our hearts and renew them.

The Church of Milan, in its Ambrosian Liturgy, also celebrates the new Light and the joys of the Virgin-Mother:

When Our Lord came, He dispelled all the darkness of night; and where had been no light, there was made brightness, and the day appeared.

Rejoice and be glad, O Mary, Thou joy of the Angels! Rejoice, O Thou Virgin of the Lord, and joy of the Prophets! Rejoice, Thou Blessed One, the Lord is with Thee. Rejoice, Thou that didst receive, at the Angel's announcing, Him Who is the joy of the world. Rejoice, Thou that didst give birth to Thy Creator and Lord. Rejoice, in that Thou wast worthy to be made the Mother of Christ.

The Gothic Church unites her voice with that of all these others, and in her Mozarabic Breviary thus hails the rising of the Divine Sun:

Today has risen the Light of the world: today has shone forth the earth's salvation: today the Savior of Israel has come down from the heavenly country, that He may set free all the slaves Whom the old enemy and robber had enslaved by the sin of our first Parent; that He might also restore, by His preventing grace, light to the blind of heart, and hearing to the deaf. For the benefits of this so great mystery, let the mountains and hills leap with joy, and the very elements of the world be exceeding glad on this day, and sing sweet melody. Therefore, let us, in humblest prayer, suppliantly beseech our most merciful Redeemer; that we who are beset by the darkness of our sins, may, by this our hearts' acclamation, be speedily delivered; that He appearing among us, the brightness of His glory may more joyously and abundantly gleam in our souls, and the happiness of salvation gladden them with never-ending sweetness.

Let us end this our tour of ancient Liturgies, by culling a flower from Erin. The Church of Ireland, in the seventh century, used to sing this Antiphon on Christmas Day. Here again we find the idea so often alluded to: the triumph of the Sun's light, which begins today, considered as the image of the Birth of Jesus:

From this Day, night decreases, day increases, darkness is shaken, light grows longer, and the loss of night shall make the gain of day.