

## Chapter viii: *Gloria.*

**C**RISIS IS WHAT we'd got up to last chapter. We have, with many words and movements, come to the altar of God, and we find that we can't, as it were, bear it. The patent magnificence of God drives the mood of Mass from preparation to introspection: to the Collect for Purity, the indicting Summary of the Law of love, then the cry *of Kyrie eleison, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy*, boring into our souls, rising to an intensity. These words of purity and order cut into us, for we are impure and disorderly, and there is nothing man can naturally ask from God except pity and benevolence; and we cannot, by nature, know if that feeble cry is received beyond the circles of the world.

The cry *Kyrie eleison* is the most man can do on his own. Here is the culmination of human worship without revelation, and it is not enough to make us glad. It no more than the pagans cried; it is incomplete; it is a sad cry.

### **The angelic hymn.**

**B**UT CONTEMPLATE THIS: one of those Mediterranean winter nights, clear and not foggy with cold, the constellations boring through a sky of ice. The cold's intense without being bitter – not quite a frost. The scraggy hillside beneath the stars is half-visible in their light, which is lucid enough to cast a pale shadow. One star seems even brighter than all the rest. There are no other lights except the embers of the camp-fire certain peasants have lit against jackals. These men are

dozing around it, while their sheep stir restlessly in a fold fabricated from tangled thorn-bushes. No doubt the men said their prayers before settling down for the night: *Lord, have mercy upon us*. There is, after all, nothing more for them to say.

We know about these men because of a certain ancient writing. This ancient writing has been describing something quite different, something happening down in the village beneath the hills, when its camera pans out and closes on that point in the jagged heights. The narrative makes a sudden hop: *et pastores erant in regione eadem*, it says, suddenly: *and there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field*—

*And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day . . . Christ the Lord. . . . And suddenly there was with the angel (et subito facta est cum angelo) a multitude of the heavenly host (multitudo militiæ cælestis) praising God, and saying (laudantium Deum et dicentium):*

*Glory to God in the highest* Gloria in altissimis Deo  
*and on earth peace,* et in terra pax  
*good will toward men.* in hominibus bonæ voluntatis.<sup>1</sup>

As always in the Gospels, but especially in Luke, we have to struggle to hear these words as if for the first time, because their very beauty and familiarity have made them sound hackneyed. The dome of heaven, which was black and pierced with stars, is suddenly torn, and the peasants wake up screaming, seared by a light which existed before the worlds began, streaming down onto their tiny planet through that rend in the sheltering sky. Gabriel is filling half the vault, descended upon them, speaking to them in words louder than thunder, so bright he can bear to can stand in the face of God. And he's hardly finished with his news when regiments and regiments of the blessed deathless army, unable to hold back any more, burst forth, visible and audible, so that the finite night sky simply vanishes, and there falls on the appalled ears of

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<sup>1</sup> Luke ii<sup>8-14</sup>— or *peace to men of good will*; the earliest texts go either way.

the shepherds (curled up under their cloaks, writhing, trying to stuff the rough fabric into their burning eyes) the sound of the immortals making ecstatic music, singing from above time and beyond the expanding universe –

*Gloria in altissimis Deo :  
et in terra pax,  
in hominibus bonæ voluntatis*

– so that the shepherds’ sad night-time prayer, *Kyrie eleison*, is obliterated.

### Christianity and the *Gloria*

**T**HIS SUDDEN JERK FROM THE SAD PIETY of the heathens (and indeed the sad piety of Israel) to Christianity’s overwhelming exuberance, happens on Christmas eve because Christmas is what allows it. God becomes Man, and even the angels have nothing to say to that except to chorus *Gloria in altissimus! Glory in the highest, Gloria in excelsis* – and to add what inevitably follows from such glory: that now, on earth, all men of good will can have what naturally no man can have, eternal peace. All is ultimately well with humanity. Our little aspiration for mercy is wiped out in wonder. Of course our evil is forgiven us, too, but that’s a relatively small part of Christianity, and thus a small part of the Mass. In the Mass, *Kyrie* yields to *Gloria* as starlight yields to sunrise. The crisis I spoke of at the start of this chapter breaks into unspeakable (and almost unsingable) joy, and into peace.

It took some centuries for the glorious hymn to find its natural place in the Mass. Some early Christian boldly expanded the angels’ first three lines to a full hymn – for in these early days the Church was easy-going about *psalmi idiotici*. The Latin doesn’t mean what it looks like: *psalmi idiotici* were private poems adapting and imitating scripture itself. Very soon, perhaps even in the second century, the Greek Church began to repeat this ‘angelic hymn’, the humanly expanded hymn of Bethlehem, in her dawn prayers (which is where she still uses it). Hilary of Poitiers, traditionally, brought this back to Gaul after he returned from exile in the East, and he translated it into Latin. At the crack of the sixth century

Pope Symmachus was decreeing that this Latin *Gloria in excelsis*, “the hymn of the Angels”, be sung after the *Kyrie* at every Sunday Mass in the West, but only if the bishop celebrated – it is too holy, Symmachus thought, for mere priests (who were only allowed to sing it at Easter). Priests weren’t pleased about this, but his prohibition held until the eleventh or twelfth century. Since then the rule is that the *Gloria* is said or sung after the *Kyrie* at every Mass everywhere in the Western Church, except where its exuberance would be out of place: that is, at certain quiet Low Masses; at Masses for the dead; and in the penitential seasons of Lent and Advent, which of course includes today.

Today we don’t hear it, and that in itself takes some thinking about.

### Omitting the *Gloria*.

**S**ILENCE CAN BE LOUD, and there are no silences in the Mass louder than the absence of the *Gloria*. We expect the tension of *Lord have mercy* to be relieved by the jovial triumph of *Glory be to God on high*, and it isn’t. Instead, we go straight from the crisis and strain of the *Kyrie* to the precision of the day’s Collect. The tension remains suspended, like a suspended chord, unresolved, as we sit and hear the readings. If we are properly attuned to the Mass, the question of the *Kyrie* (*will* God in fact have mercy?) remains hanging in the air, unanswered, and with it comes a certain intensity and unease.

At Requiem Masses, when we don’t hear the *Gloria* – or, as it were, when we hear the absence-of-*Gloria* – this intensity melds with mourning and uncompleted farewell. In Lent the absence-of-*Gloria* creates an intensity of penitence and sober reflection. At Low Masses when the *Gloria* is omitted a particular mood of down-beat, businesslike quiet is established; exuberance is hushed; this is God giving us today our daily Bread.

But in Advent the suspended resolution is about expectation. The absence-of-*Gloria* hangs in the air because the angelic hymn has not yet begun. Until the Midnight Mass we are with the shepherds, curled up in the wintry night by the fire, yet to hear the immortals singing to us. We have yet to say

one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the Babe

– and we have yet to return to the world announcing the news.

From Christmas until Ash Wednesday we'll be like the shepherds returning from Bethlehem – *reversi sunt pastores glorificantes et laudantes Deum, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them*. But at the moment we do not hear the *hymnus angelicus*. We're still yearning.

For the rest of this chapter, I'm going to describe what hearing the angelic hymn is like, so that we can savour more exactly today's sensation of hearing nothing.

(You might want to have the text of the *Gloria* open in front of you.)

### Hearing the *Gloria*.

**I**T SHOULD SOUND ABRUPT, as on the hill in Judæa. The plaintive and noble cry *Eleison, Have mercy*, nine times repeated, breaks without transition into something huger. Violently the sky breaks open – so potently it makes us reflect how heaven must *exert* itself to stay veiled on earth. Finite human life is only possible because God holds back His overpowering, infinite presence, first in the act of creation, then, constantly, by allowing our minds their freedom. If His restraint were relaxed, we would be overwhelmed and crushed. His apparent absence, necessary to mortal life, takes effort. It is a sort of miracle.

When God came to us as humanity, divine humility and restraint were so intense He descended on a cave behind a tavern in the tiniest of provincial road-stops. He remains with us materially, and to do that the divine humility chooses the dazzling simplicity of wafers. Even so, at the Prayer of Consecration we are to imagine how

*Rank on rank the host of heaven  
spreads its vanguard on the way,  
As the Light of Light descendeth  
from the realms of endless day,*

During that prayer the veil of sky wears so thin we hear music out of eternity, the *Sanctus*:

*At His feet the six-winged seraph;  
cherubim with sleepless eye  
Veil their faces to the Presence  
as with ceaseless voice they cry . . . .<sup>2</sup>*

Something of the sort happens now, as we complete the tragic human cry to God for mercy. God's response is not mercy but, infinitely more: Incarnation. It occurs, at this point in the rite, tacitly. The cry for mercy is completed; then, suddenly, we find we have passed from Advent to Christmas, from to *Kyrie* to *Glory*. It has happened before we know it. What falls between the *Kyrie* and the *Gloria* is the Incarnation; as in the Christmas carol, *How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is giv'n.<sup>3</sup>* The first we hear of Christmas is from the heavenly host: once the unutterable marvel is accomplished, the bright armies fail for a few moment to hold back their unending cries from our fragile world – *et subito facta est multitudo militiæ cælestis, laudantium Deum et dicentium*, suddenly there is a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, *Gloria altissimus Deo*.

Heaven's restraint slackens; immortal voices break down on us. More amazingly, our slight voices are allowed to rise up and mingle with their limitless music. The *Gloria in excelsis*, heard on Christmas night, boldly elaborated into a hymn by the early Church, is now taken up by humanity and sung back toward heaven. For at every Mass we feel the Incarnation beginning again on earth, so that the veil between finity and infinity fades, and men and the blessed company sing along with each other, unleashing their love, wonder and praise in a torrent, mortal and immortal voices, not so dissimilar, now, blending.

## Choreography.

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<sup>2</sup> From the incomparable *Liturgy of St James*, number 197 in our hymnal.

<sup>3</sup> 'O little town of Bethlehem', number 21, verse 3, in *The Hymnal* (1940).

**W**E'RE ABOUT TO CONSIDER THE BRAVE WORDS of the *Gloria* : meanwhile, here comes another diagram, showing the physical state of play during this frozen frame of the Mass.

At the Collect for Purity the celebrant addressed God in the elegant and earnest *orans* position (forearms extended, palms facing inward); his two sacred ministers stood directly behind him. While he recited the Summary of the Law, he put his hands back to the default liturgical position: palms together, fingers pointing up, thumbs crossed over each other, right over left (a delicate hint of the Cross). In this pose he recited the *Kyrie eleison* while the choir sang it. As the *Kyrie*s ended he moved to the centre of the altar, and now, for the first time in the Mass, he stands there, directly in front of Christ's table-throne-Calvary-tomb-tent (we'll come to the *tent* aspect in a few chapters' time).

The deacon on his lower step, and the subdeacon on his even lower step, moved with their leader, and momentarily stood in a line behind them. Now, as the *Gloria* begins, the celebrant makes the 'precenting' gesture: he swoops out his arms, gathering up the prayers of humanity and lifting them up to God, and then brings his hands together again, bowing slightly as he says *God* or *Deo*. For it is the celebrant who offers *Gloria in excelsis Deo* to God. Sometimes he actually sings that first line himself, the choir pitching in with *Et in terra pax*. In any case, it is the celebrant who leads us in echoing the angelic hymn back to heaven; at once the first phrase is done, his two sacred ministers move up the steps to join him, the deacon stepping right and one step up, the subdeacon left and two steps up (it's a fine, stately movement) until all three are at God's table, sharing the merry Christmas praise. It looks like this:



DIAGRAM adapted from Fortescue-O'Connell

THE ONE I PRINTED IS BACK TO FRONT!

### Glory to the Father.

**G**LORY TO GOD, IN ETERNITY; on earth, now, *therefore*, peace. Yes! This sublime equation provokes a burst of veneration addressed to God the Father. First there's a rising run of powerful verbs: *laudamus*, we praise – more, *benedicimus*, we bless – more, *adoramus*, we *worship*. And, higher yet in energy, *glorificamus*, we *glorify* Him. Finally, at the pinnacle of religious passion: *gratias agimus tibi propter magnam Gloriam tuam, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory!* Here's the bedrock of all religious faith: the fact of God, the infinitude of splendour, matters more – even to mankind – than our own happiness. If we were lost, sanity would still have us stand and praise. Our most ecstatic thanks to God are due to Him simply for existing, not for what He does for us. The sumptuousness of the fact that He *is* lights up the worlds with joy, and is the ultimate rapture of the hosts of paradise – and is even (at least for the elevated seconds while they sing *Gloria in excelsis*) the ultimate rapture of bad and selfish mortal men . . . .

Ah! but we can't have mere parish worshippers rising to such heights, can we? The International Commission on English in the Liturgy is a Roman Catholic committee set up after the Second Vatican Council to war on liturgy and the English language. Nothing is beyond its



withering grasp; the infant learning to lisp his native tongue will whimper and cower should anyone whisper “I.C.E.L.” over his cradle; in Rome the *stucco* cherubim plummet from the *palazzo façades* and shatter to dust with a moan as the shameless members of this cabal mince past in nylon polo-necks and drip-dry safari suits. Their name will be for centuries to come the wandering hiss of a dirty wind across a graveyard, a rumour of devouring chaos, a despairing shriek in the night. – Among bad deeds innumerable, and continuing, the I.C.E.L. perpetrated this atrocity: it butchered the *hymnus angelicus*, holding that we are too stupid and low-minded to join the angels in thanking God for His great glory. No nice *gratias agimus tibi propter magnam Gloriam tuam* for us. The I.C.E.L. scribbled out all that first bit about thanks, and by scratching *laudamus, we praise Thee*, from the line beginning *laudamus, we praise Thee*, freed up enough scrap to piece together this: *We praise you for your glory.* –

Bah! it’s too banal for a rusted-over Midwestern slum’s corrupt yellow-dog Democrat mayor to slur in his drunken speech to the homecoming queen. Nonetheless, this is the travesty *Gloria* our Roman brothers have to recite (or croon to ballad tunes). Moreover, most revised rites in the Anglican Communion, including America’s gruesome Rite II, have aped the vandalism.<sup>4</sup>

The seraphsim who first sang *Glory be!* over Bethlehem now spend this moment of each modernised Mass, Roman or Anglican, wincing, shuddering in their undying and disgusted sixfold wings, and sighing sighs terrible to hear, sighs which the modernisers affect not to hear.

At least these horrors do not directly concern us. At this point in the Mass we, in unity with all Christendom for fifteen centuries behind us (and no doubt for many centuries after us, when these liturgical traversties shall have faded away), and in unity with the unsleeping host of heaven, cry our thanks to God for being God. And the first stanza of the *Gloria*, the stanza addressed to the First Person of the Trinity, ends in another torrent, this time a torrent of glad titles: *O Domine Deus, O Lord*

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<sup>4</sup> Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (Seabury, New York, 1981), p. 29. Actually the ICET, International Consultation on English Texts, I think the ecumencial version. There’s an 1990 edition, not on Lof C shelves yet.

*God! Rex Cœlestis, King of Heaven! Deus Pater omnipotens! God the Father All-powerful!*

### Glory to the Son.

**T**HE SECOND STANZA OF THE *GLORIA* hymns the Second Person, and because the Trinity is a Unity, it takes up one of the same titles, *Domine Deus, Lord God.*

*O Lord the Only-Begotten Son, Domine Fili Unigenite*, we sing; then the Holy Name: *JESU Christe, Domine Deus*; then *Lamb of God, Agnus Dei* (which we'll hear more of later in the Mass); then the wonderfully quiet title *Son of the Father, Filius Patris.*

But suddenly this lofty succession of names reminds us of ourselves; for why is Christ called *Agnus Dei* except that He was the Lamb of sacrifice Who died *for us*, not because we deserved it but because we didn't? Therefore emotional logic inserts into the mighty praise of the *Gloria* three lines begging Christ's aid for us: an echo of the *Kyrie*, a premonition of the *Agnus Dei*. The poetry leaps back and forth between earth and the height of Paradise, as is suitable to an angelic hymn. O Christ! *Thou who sittest at the right hand of the Father, Qui sedes ad dextram Patris*, we sing; *Thou who takest away all the sins of the world, Qui tollis peccata mundi – suscipe deprecationem nostram, receive our prayers, miserere nobis, have mercy on us.* These vivid little phrases are woven together in a fine, dance-like motion (*QUI TOLLIS, miserere, QUI TOLLIS, suscipe, QUI SEDES, miserere*). The pattern's so rich and dignified that – ah, you've guessed. Yes, the I.C.E.L. noticed its beauty, and it was done away with. –

But why trouble ourselves? Here we're free of the I.C.E.L.'s tyranny, and still sing this lovely figure.

Having begged Christ's aid, the *Gloria* turns back into praise. For Christ can sit where He sits, and take away what He takes away, and receive prayer and have mercy, because He is, alone of men, what He is: God – *sanctus, Dominus, altissimus: Holy, Lord, Most High.* That's what the angels declared over Bethlehem, and that is how we hail Him now: *Tu solus, O Thou alone!* And we invoke the Name again with which God

reconciled Himself to the world: *JESU Christe, Who is – cum Sancto Spiritu, with the Holy Ghost* (which sounds like an afterthought, an addition to the text, because it is an afterthought and addition; it took the Church a while to grasp the mystery of the Trinity) – One, *in the eternal glory of God the Father, that same glory of the Lord* [which] *shone round about* the shepherds when Christmas began. *In Gloria Dei Patris. Amen!* And the words of the angels' hymn are accomplished.

### Gestures.

LITURGY FREES THE TONGUE from its normal clumsiness, letting it speak what it usually cannot for dullness. And liturgy also frees the body from its own stolid dullness, so that the body also joins in the ecstatic ease of ritual. What normally cannot be expressed at all is expressed easily here, for motion and words are prescribed by the cumulative wisdom of the Church, and by the cumulative passion of the Church – wisdom and passion far greater and more human than any individual's. We enter the dance and move freely because we move according to a long-perfected pattern. In ritual we can speak love, and shape praise with gestures, and sculpt with our workaday bodies adoration eloquent as music.

Accompanying Mass' poetry of sung, chanted and spoken words is a poetry of the head and arms and legs, shared not only by celebrant and ministers, but by the people too, if they want to share it. And for nineteen centuries people have rejoiced for to bow and kneel and nod their way through the sacred eucharistic opera, making church merry and buoyant as a ballroom – until the ice age of modernity laid the Mass waste, forbidding most of the people's gestures on the astonishing grounds of *participation*. We'll examine this monstrous argument next chapter.

Already, at the Collect for Purity, the congregation has *knelt* – making that drastic movement of adoration and submission. Now, during the *Gloria*, we come across two more of the Mass' range of devout gestures: bows and crossings.

The Holy Name, JESUS, is the proper, given, personal Name of the Second Person of the Godhead as a Man. That God should have had a name, just as you and I have names, pulls us into the centre of the dazing mystery of Incarnation. It makes one want to bow. Well, in liturgy such extravagant impulses can be sated. We literally bow at the Holy Name, which crops up twice in the *Gloria*, and often again throughout the Mass (each time a bow).

At the phrase *Adoramus te, We worship Thee*, we worship God not just by saying so, but by doing so: by bowing the head before Him.

When we reach the pinnacle of praise, offering our thanks to God for His existence – *Gratias agimus tibi*, that phrase suppressed by our modern liturgical masters – we bow to Him again; and again when we are bold enough to address to Infinity the demand *Suscipe, Receive our prayers*.

Finally, as we invoke the Trinity at the end of the *Gloria* we make the fundamental gesture of the Christian faith, the [sign of the Cross](#), about which there is a lot to be said – but not yet.

### **The setting.**

**F**OR THE LAST TWO CHAPTERS, while we've run over the words of the *Kyrie* and *Gloria*, plotting the dance-steps of the clergy and people, you'll have been thinking that the most remarkable thing has been left out. For at High Mass *Kyrie* and *Gloria* aren't just danced through, and said, or recited, or even chanted: they are sung. They are more obviously pieces of choral music than they are anything else.

There are seven elements of the Mass traditionally sung by the choir, to complex and lush music: the *Kyrie*, the *Gloria*, the *Credo*, the *Sanctus* and *Benedictus* (which generally run together), the *Agnus Dei* and *Ite missa est*. These sections together form the [setting](#) of the Mass, and a setting of Mass is not only the musical heart of the rite, but one of the greatest genres of Western music. Indeed, 'the Mass', the choral setting of *Kyrie*, *Gloria* and so forth, is among the great art-forms of our civilisation. By seeking to drive this art-form out of church the liturgical

reformers of the 1960s wounded not only man's worship of God, but Western civilisation as well.

(So why need we be polite about them?)

Next chapter is the last week before Christmas, and thus a good time to contemplate how heaven's ceaseless music of has dropped down to earth. Mass, that greatest of human actions, must be the greatest occasion of human song. The music of Mass is not decorative. For us, as for the shepherds, the natural sky has been rent by an immense harmony of sound.