

Thomas of Celano and the "Dies Irae"

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Thomas of Celano—"Friar Minor, poet, and hagiographical writer . . ." ¹ was probably born at Celano in the Province of Abruzzi, about 1200. It is thought that he died about 1255, though neither the date of his birth nor death is absolutely known to scholars of medieval history. A Franciscan friar, he was the devout biographer and disciple of St. Francis of Assisi. In regard to the latter he was one of the first group (comprising eleven) of disciples who followed St. Francis. Thomas joined this group in 1214, and traveled in Germany spreading the good news of a redeeming Christ. Upon one occasion it is thought that he went into Germany with Caesar of Speyer. The following year he was made custos of the convents at Mayence, Worms, Speyer, and Cologne. Later, Caesar of Speyer, on his return to Italy, made him vicar in the government of the German province. Then, Thomas was an early biographer of St. Francis. Some say he was the first biographer, while others say he was only an early writer on the life of St. Francis. He was commissioned by Gregory IX to write Francis' life. In 1229 he completed the *First Legend*, while in 1247, at the command of the minister general, he wrote the *Second Legend*. There was yet a third volume entitled the *Tract on the Miracles of St. Francis*. The latter was published a few years after the *Second Legend*, at the encouragement of the Blessed John of Parma. Henry Osborn Taylor has characterized the Franciscan monk as follows:

One of the earliest biographers of St. Francis of Assisi was Thomas of Celano, a skilled Latinist, who was enraptured with the loveliness of Francis' life. His diction is limpid and rhythmical. ²

This "limpid and rhythmical" diction is best seen in his "Dies Irae." "This great 'Sequence of the Western Church' was probably written about 1208 by the above named obscure Franciscan monk

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1. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: The Gilmary Society, 1912), Vol XIV, p. 694.
 2. Henry Osborn Taylor, *The Mediaeval Mind* (London; Macmillan, Ltd., 1911), Vol.II, p. 182.

for his own private devotions.”³ Indeed he died not knowing he had written such a masterpiece which was to echo its way down through the centuries.⁴

Philip Schaff says of the Latin hymn, “Dies Irae,” that it was “written in a lonely monastic cell, about 1250, by Thomas of Celano, the friend and biographer of St. Francis of Assisi.”⁵ Ruth Ellis Messenger, a keen student of Latin hymnody, states that “A Franciscan friar of the thirteenth century, Thomas of Celano, is credited with the writing of the great Judgment hymn, *Dies irae, dies illa*, ‘Day of wrath! O day of mourning!’ ”⁶

In a study of the “Dies Irae” itself, we shall ask the question, What is the scriptural basis of this great Latin hymn? Schaff, in *Christ in Song*, lists three basic references: (1) Zephaniah 1:15, 16, “That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the trumpet and alarm, against the fortified cities, and against the high battlements. (2) II Peter 3:10-12:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing that these things are thus all to be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy living and godliness, looking for and earnestly desiring the coming of the day of God, by reason of which the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat?

(3) Finally, the judgment portion of Matthew 25 is cited as part of the scriptural basis for the “Dies Irae.”

The characteristics of the “Dies Irae” are clear and concise. This is first of all a Judgment hymn. It depicts the dissolution of the world and the trembling sinner as he looks to the last day and appeals for mercy. Philip Schaff characterizes it “as the acknowledged masterpiece of Latin Church poetry and the greatest judgment hymn of all ages.”⁷

3. Caroline Leonard Goodenough, *High Lights on Hymnists and Their Hymns* (Rochester, Mass.: Pub. by Author, 1931), p. 34.

4. *Loc. cit.*

5. Philip Schaff, *Christ in Song* (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph and Co., 1869), p. 372.

6. Ruth Ellis Messenger, “Latin Hymns in the Middle Ages” (*The American Hymn Society*—a paper edited by Carl F. Price), p. 12.

7. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribners, 1914), Vol. V, Pt. I, p. 867.

The poet is the single actor. He realizes the coming judgment of the world, he hears the trumpet of the arch-angel through the open sepulchre, he expresses this sense of guilt and dismay, and ends with a prayer for the same mercy which the Savior showed to Mary Magdalene and to the thief on the Cross. The stanzas sound like the peals of an organ; now crashing like a clap of thunder, now stealing softly and tremulously like a whisper through the vacant cathedral spaces. The first words are taken from Zephaniah 1:15. Like the Fathers and Michael Angelo and the painters of the Renaissance, the author unites the prediction of the heathen Sibyl with the prophecies of the Old Testament.⁸

There are yet other quotations which should be observed for their value in the area of characterization:

The secret of the irresistible power of the *Dies Irae* lies in the awful grandeur of the theme, the intense earnestness and pathos of the poet, the simple majesty and solemn music of its language, the stately metre, the adaptation to the sense,—all combining to produce an overwhelming effect, as if we heard the final crash of the universe, the commotion of the opening graves, the trumpet of the arch-angel summoning the quick and the dead, and saw the "King of tremendous majesty" seated on the throne of Justice and mercy, and ready to dispense everlasting life or everlasting woe.⁹

The opening line, which is literally borrowed from the Vulgate version of Zephaniah 1:15... strikes the keynote to the whole with a startling sound, and brings up at once the judgment-scene as an awful impending reality. The feeling of terror occasioned by the contemplation of that event culminates in the cry of repentance, verse 7: "Quid sum, miser, tunc dicturus," etc.; but from this the poet rises at once to the prayer of faith, and takes refuge from the wrath to come in the infinite mercy of Him who suffered nameless pain for a guilty world, who pardoned the sinful Magdalene, and saved the dying robber.¹⁰

Indeed, we are in the very presence of one of the most moving of Latin poems.

Dr. Robinson, in his "Annotations," says of this hymn, "It stands pre-eminent not only because of the grandeur of the theme, but also from the perfection of its form and rhythm," and quotes from an English critic, "The metre so grandly devised, fitted to bring out the noblest powers of the Latin language, the solemn effect of the triple rhyme—like blow following blow of the hammer on the anvil—the

8. *Loc. cit.*

9. Schaff, *Christ in Song, op. cit.*, p. 373.

10. *Loc. cit.*

majestic, unadorned plainness of the style—these merits, with many more, have given the *Dies Irae* a foremost place among the masterpieces of sacred song.”¹¹

Dr. Charles C. Nott has likewise made an apt description of the effect of this hymn:

This lyric, which is the greatest of hymns, nevertheless is cast in the simplest of forms. Beginning with an exclamation from the Scriptures, it continues through its few stanzas the address of a single actor upon a single subject. Its measure could not be more artless, nor its stanzas more simple. The august language in which it is clothed, it has bent into the form of rhyme, and this rhyme is of a kind which is said to be wanting in dignity, and better adapted to comic than elevated verse. Yet it commands the homage of the Englishman, the German, the Italian, and the modern Greek; and even possesses so strange a gift of fascination, a gift in which no other composition equals and but one other approaches it, that the very sound of its words will allure him who is ignorant of their meaning.¹²

J. E. Raby has perhaps best described the great hymn and the spirit of the age into which it came. He calls the “*Dies Irae*” the most majestic of medieval sequences.”¹³

Perfect in form, and exhibiting complete mastery of the two-syllabled rhyme, it is the most sublime and poignant expression of the terror of the day, foretold by Jewish prophet or pagan Sibyl, when the heavens and earth were to pass away, and Christ would appear in His glory to judge the living and the dead.¹⁴

Aquinas Byrnes, in *The Hymns of the Dominican Breviary*, has done splendid work in analyzing this great hymn. He begins by stating that the hymn is now used as a Requiem sequence, though it was originally intended as a hymn for the Advent season. Then he launches into a verse by verse analysis of the work. So that we may follow him better, here is the “*Dies Irae*” in an English translation:

Day of wrath and doom impending,
David's word with Sibyl blending!
Heaven and earth in ashes ending!

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11. David R. Breed, *The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-Tunes* (New York: Revell, 1903), pp. 35, 36.
 12. Charles C. Nott, *The Seven Great Hymns of the Mediaeval Church* (New York: Edwin S. Gorham, Publisher, 1902), pp. 45, 46.
 13. F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry* (London: Oxford, 1927), p. 443.
 14. *Ibid.*

O, what fear man's bosom rendeth,
When from heaven the Judge descendeth,
On whose sentence all dependeth!

Wondrous sound the trumpet flingeth,
Through earth's sepulchers it ringeth,
All before the throne it bringeth.

Death is struck, and nature quaking,
All creation is awaking,
To its Judge an answer making.

Lo! the book exactly worded,
Wherein all hath been recorded;
Thence shall judgment be awarded.

When the Judge His seat attaineth,
And each hidden deed arraigneth,
Nothing unavenged remaineth.

What shall I, frail man, be pleading?
Who for me be interceding,
When the just are mercy needing?

King of majesty tremendous,
Who dost free salvation send us,
Fount of pity, then befriend us!

Think, kind Jesus! my salvation
Caused Thy wondrous Incarnation;
Leave me not to reprobation.

Faint and weary Thou hast sought me,
On the Cross of suffering bought me;
Shall such grace be vainly brought me?

Righteous Judge! for sin's pollution
Grant Thy gift of absolution,
Ere that day of retribution.

Guilty, now I pour my moaning,
All my shame with anguish owning;
Spare, O God, Thy suppliant groaning!

Through the sinful woman shriven,
Through the dying thief forgiven,
Thou to me a hope has given.

Worthless are my prayers and sighing,
Yet, good Lord, in grace complying,
Rescue me from fires undying.

With Thy favored sheep O place me,
Nor among the goats abase me,
But to Thy right hand upraise me.

While the wicked are confounded,
Doomed to flames of woe unbounded,
Call me with Thy Saints surrounded.

Low I kneel, with heart submission,
Crushed to ashes in contrition;
Help me in my last condition!

Ah! that day of tears and mourning!
From the dust of earth returning,
Man for judgment must prepare him;

Spare, O God, in mercy spare him!
Lord all-pitying, Jesu Blest,
Grant them Thine eternal rest.¹⁵

The first six stanzas describe the Judgment. The other stanzas are lyric in character, expressing anguish

of one of the multitude there present in spirit—his pleading before the Judge who, while on earth, sought him unceasingly over the hard and thorny ways from Bethlehem to Calvary; and now, in anticipation of the Judgment, pleads before a Savior of infinite mercy, who, on Judgment Day, will be a Judge of infinite justice, before whom scarcely the just will be secure.¹⁶

Stanza seven connects the descriptive with the lyric parts, while eight represents Christ as "King of awful majesty" in the Last Judgment, and "Font of loving piety" in the present life. Stanzas nine to fourteen develop the idea of God's mercy. The latter comprise two divisions of three stanzas each. Nine to eleven is an appeal of mercy made on the basis of labors and sufferings of the Christ. Twelve to fourteen deal with the repentance of the sinner. Stanza fifteen presents the just (the sheep) and the unjust (the goats), while the sixteenth stanza concludes with the final note of "depart ye cursed," and "come ye blessed."¹⁷

The use of the "Dies Irae" has been most extensive, ranging in its employment from services in the Roman ritual to the great English poets. It is used in the Burial Service of the Roman Church, and also appears as one of the hymns frequently used on All Souls

15. Aquinas Byrnes, Editor, *The Hymns of the Dominican Breviary* (London: B. Herder Book Co., 1943), pp. 37-43.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

17. *Loc. cit.*

Day, November second. Its earliest known use was in a Mass in 1480,¹⁸ while Mozart introduced it more specifically into his Requiem Mass in the eighteenth century. In fact, Mozart made it the basis of his Requiem, and it is said that he became so excited over its theme, that it hastened his death.¹⁹ In Protestant groups the "Dies Irae" is employed as an Advent hymn.²⁰

The translation of this hymn is one of the most interesting stories in the history of the transmutation of language. Authorities differ as to the number of versions and translations through which the hymn has gone. At any rate, it is certain that there have been more translations of "Dies Irae" than any other Latin poem. Schaff says there are 133 versions,²¹ while Breed estimates the number at 160.²²

"Dies Irae" is such a fearful hymn on the Judgment that it is often omitted from hymnological collections. McCutchen observes that "having lost their fear of retribution, apparently modern compilers have not seen fit to include any translations of the 'Dies Irae' in their hymnals."²³ However, "Dies Irae" may be found in certain of the classic collections. It is seen in *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, number 398. Schaff, in *Christ in Song*, records it on pages 372 following. Nutter includes it in his exhaustive collection (number 1023).

Schaff makes a summary statement as to its use:

It is one of those rare productions which can never die, but increase in value as the ages advance. It has commanded the admiration of secular poets, and men of letters, like Goethe, Walter Scott, and Macaulay, and has inspired some of the greatest musicians, from Palestrina down to Mozart.²⁴

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18. Lawrence R. Schoenhals, *Series of Lectures*, Seattle Pacific College, 1947.
 19. Goodenough, *loc. cit.*
 20. Harvey B. Marks, *The Rise and Growth of English Hymnody* (New York: Revell, 1938), p. 61.
 21. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, *loc. cit.*
 22. Breed, *The History and Use of Hymns and Hymn-Tunes*, *loc. cit.*, pp. 35, 36.
 23. Robert Guy McCutchan, *Hymns in the Lives of Men* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1943), p. 117.
 24. Schaff, *Christ in Song*, *op. cit.*, pp. 372, 373.