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Preludes to Praise—Devotional Reflections

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# Preludes to Praise: Devotional Reflections

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There are three anonymous hymns in our rite which, though they are not of divine inspiration, have received a place in the worship of the church all but totally on a par with the psalms and canticles that can unquestionably claim God as their divine Author.

The first is the canticle *Benedicite omnia opera*.<sup>1</sup> Even before our Lord's birth Hellenistic Judaism gave this canticle a place in its Sacred Scriptures as a part of the third chapter of the Book of Daniel.<sup>2</sup>

The second is the *Laudamus te*, the hymn introduced by the angelic paeon of praise: "Glory be to God on high and on earth peace, goodwill to men." It is a morning hymn of the church in the East and a Eucharistic chant of the church in the West.<sup>3</sup> One of the oldest witnesses to its text is a manuscript of the Sacred Scriptures, the Codex Alexandrinus.

The third is the great lay that is both creed and canticle, the *Te Deum laudamus*.<sup>4</sup> Concerning this hymn medieval Christians for centuries believed that it had been sung for the first time by SS. Ambrose and Augustine at the latter's baptism, the officiant and the candidate receiving it by immediate inspiration from on high.

## I

We have no way of knowing with certainty who wrote *Benedicite omnia opera* or when it was written. The time that suggests itself is the vehement pogrom that the Seleucid emperor Antiochus Epiphanes mounted against the Jews in the seventeenth decade before Christ's birth.<sup>5</sup> In the prayer of Azariah which immediately precedes our canticle, he confesses that in true judgment God had given His people "into the hands of lawless enemies, most hateful rebels, and to an unjust king, the most wicked in all the world."<sup>6</sup> This lament reflects the situation reported in the first chapter of First Maccabees, which might very well have seemed to pious Jews a fiery furnace of misfortune. But whoever wrote the *Benedicite omnia opera* and whenever it may have been written, it has much to say to us in our own day.

First, it reminds us that there is no place and no situation where we cannot praise God as long as we are confident of His saving presence. The people of God of intertestamental times inserted this canticle into the third chapter of Daniel. This is the chapter which recites the episode of the fiery furnace on the plain of Dura. Three of Nebuchadnezzar's Jewish lieutenants, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (or, to give them their Hebrew names, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael),

<sup>1</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1941), p. 120.

<sup>2</sup> Following verse 23. See "The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men," vv. 35-65, in *The Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, c. 1957), pp. 182, 183.

<sup>3</sup> *The Lutheran Hymnal*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 35-37.

<sup>5</sup> See Bruce M. Metzger, *An Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), chap. x, esp. pp. 101-104.

<sup>6</sup> "The Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Young Men," vv. 8, 9.

associates of Daniel whom the king had promoted on Daniel's recommendation, had steadfastly refused to worship the royal statue according to the king's prescription. For this Nebuchadnezzar had ordered them cast into a brick kiln "heated seven times more than it was wont to be heated" (Daniel 3:19). "Because the king's order was strict," the ancient chronicler reports, "and the furnace very hot, the flame of the fire slew those men who took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And these three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, fell bound into the burning fiery furnace." (Vv. 22, 23)

At this point the supplementary narrative is intercalated. "And they walked about in the midst of the flames, singing hymns to God and blessing the Lord."<sup>7</sup> One of them, Abednego, or Azariah, stood and offered his prayer. It is a moving confession of the sin of God's people and of the justice of their God and an eloquent plea for deliverance for the glory of God's own great name. "Let them know that thou art the Lord, the only God, glorious over the whole world," he concluded.<sup>8</sup>

The supplementary narrative then goes into impressive detail. The king's servants continued to feed "the furnace fires with naphtha, pitch, tow and brush, and the flame streamed out above the furnace forty-nine cubits" and burned still more of the king's servants about the mouth of the kiln. "But the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace to be with Azariah and his companions and drove the fiery flame out of the furnace, and made the midst of the furnace like a moist whistling wind, so that the fire did not

touch them at all or hurt or trouble them."<sup>9</sup>

Then Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, "as with one mouth, praised and glorified and blessed God in the furnace, saying:

"Blessed art Thou, O Lord, God of our fathers, and greatly to be praised and glorified for ever . . .

"Blessed art Thou in the temple of Thy holy glory . . .

"Blessed art Thou who sittest upon cherubim and lookest upon the deeps . . .

"Blessed art Thou upon the throne of Thy kingdom . . .

"Blessed art Thou in the firmament of heaven, and to be sung and glorified for ever."

With this introduction, our canticle, the Song of the Three Holy Children,<sup>10</sup> as it is popularly known, begins. The intent of the unnamed author is perfectly clear: As long as we are assured of the presence of the Son of God at our side, we can at all times and in all places give thanks to God, even among the flames of persecution and affliction. But do we, who have God's Gospel and His holy sacraments, always allow ourselves to find in them the warrant of our individual and common deliverance?

Second, our canticle reminds us — as the canonical Scriptures also do — that the grammar of prayer is not the same as the grammar of ordinary prose. The canticle calls upon the waters above the firmament to bless the Lord, upon the sun and moon, the stars of heaven, the showers and dew,

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, vv. 23-27.

<sup>10</sup> "The word 'children' is used in a religious and not a chronological sense (compare the phrase 'the children of Israel')" (*Metzger*, p. 101).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, vv. 2-22.

and the winds of God, upon fire and heat, winter and summer, dews and frost, frost and cold, ice and snow, upon nights and days, light and darkness, lightning and clouds, upon the earth and its mountains, its hills, its fountains, its seas, its flora and its fauna. These are apostrophes, not to be taken precisely and literally.<sup>11</sup> In inviting creation's hosts to praise the Lord, *we* are actually praising their Creator. This may suggest that not every formulation in prayer is to be subjected to literal analysis. Prayer need not always speak with the pedestrian precision of prose. Prayer can participate in the metaphorical language of poetry and still be profoundly right and true.

Third, our canticle reminds us that the whole wide world around us is an incentive to us to praise God. His salvation is the guarantee that the world which He has called into being and into which He has placed us is ultimately a friendly world, that it is His creation no less than we ourselves are, to be received from His hand as something good. There was a time when Lutherans took more seriously than we do the assertion of Bl. Martin Luther's German Bible of 1534 that the Apocrypha are books which are not to be placed on a par with Holy Scripture but nevertheless make good and profitable reading. In that day capable theologians, like Luke Osiander the Elder (1534—1604)<sup>12</sup> and John

Olearius (1611—1684)<sup>13</sup> and Abraham Calovius (1612—1686)<sup>14</sup> regarded the Apocrypha as worthy of extended commentaries embodying their best exegetical effort. They tried to find some utility in every one of these creatures that the canticle apostrophizes. Yet Luke Osiander concedes: "We should recognize that all the works of God deserve our admiration and praise, even when we are ignorant of their utility."<sup>15</sup> And so it must be. Even the chilling frost and cold of winter, even the inhospitable ice and snow, even inconvenience and disappointment, are an invitation to bless the Lord.

Fourth, our canticle reminds us that God's inanimate creation praises its Creator by being what He has made it be and by doing what He has made it do and by accomplishing the end that He has designed it to accomplish. It is by burning that fire praises the Lord, and the snow by mantling the earth, and the mountains by towering endlessly solid and fast, and the green things upon earth by growing, and the fowls by being the kind of birds and the

<sup>11</sup> The apostrophes to the angelic choirs, the blessed Virgin Mary, the patriarchs, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs, and "all saints triumphant" in Hymn No. 475 of *The Lutheran Hymnal* are comparable. See also Psalm 148: 2-10.

<sup>12</sup> Luke Osiander, *Sacrorum bibliorum . . . pars II* (Tübingen: Georgius Gruppenbachius 1598), pp. 546—798.

<sup>13</sup> John Olearius, *Anhang der canonischen Haupt-Bücher Altes Testaments, darinnen die sogenannten Apocryphi oder biblischen Zucht-Bücher . . . erkläret* (Leipzig: Johann Christoph Tarnov/Halle: David Salfeld, 1680). On the 667th folio page of this commentary Olearius concludes his work with this prayer: "God be praised for all His goodness, which He has shown to us therein too that in these good books of discipline so much good has been preserved. May He likewise grant to us to apply it to our own best advantage and preserve us in His truth so that we may forever praise His goodness in all eternity. Amen."

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Calovius, *Biblia Testamenti Veteris illustrata*, Part III (Dresden and Leipzig: Johannes Christophorus Zimmermannus/Hildburghausen: Balthasar Pentzold, 1719).

<sup>15</sup> Osiander, p. 796.

cattle by being the kind of animals that God made them to be. Then what about us? We are God's creatures, made to be human beings, redeemed by the blood of His Son that we should be rich in good works, blessed with lips upon which God's Holy Spirit has put the words of a new song. Ought not we praise God by willingly being and doing what He has created and recreated us to be and to do, by being holy and humble men of heart, by blessing the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, by praising and magnifying Him here that we may praise and magnify Him forever?

Fifth, our canticle reminds us that the praise of God is social, not solitary. God has put His salvation into our heart so that with one voice all the children of men, all of God's new Israel, all His priests and all His people might praise the Author of our deliverance together. With that great throng, that vast unnumbered host, with all the spirits and souls of the righteous, and, as we have the opportunity, in the physical company of our brothers and sisters in Christ, let us join our hearts and bless the Lord:

O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him forever.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> In the Greek original (and in the Book of Common Prayer) the refrain (usually "praise Him and magnify Him forever") is repeated after each of the 32 verses. In the Latin rite the refrain is repeated four times. The Latin rite and the English (but not the American) Book of Common Prayer retain the concluding verse: "O Ananias, Azarias, and Misael, praise ye the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him for ever." The English (but not the American) Book of Common Prayer has had the *Gloria Patri* as a doxology since 1549. After the doxological verse "Bless we the Father," etc., the Latin rite adds *Benedictus es, Domine, in firmamento caeli et laudabilis et gloriosus et superexaltatus in sae-*

O ye angels of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: O ye heavens, bless ye the Lord.

O ye waters that are above the firmament, bless ye the Lord: O ye powers of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.

O ye sun and moon, bless ye the Lord: O ye stars of heaven, bless ye the Lord.

O ye showers and dew, bless ye the Lord: O ye winds of God, bless ye the Lord.

O ye fire and heat, bless ye the Lord: O ye winter and summer, bless ye the Lord.

O ye dews and frost, bless ye the Lord: O ye nights and days, bless ye the Lord.

O ye light and darkness, bless ye the Lord: O ye lightnings and clouds, bless ye the Lord.

Oh, let the earth bless the Lord: yea, let it praise Him and magnify Him forever.

O ye mountains and hills, bless ye the Lord: O all ye green things upon the earth, bless ye the Lord.

O ye wells, bless ye the Lord: O ye seas and floods, bless ye the Lord.

O ye whales and all that move in the waters, bless ye the Lord: O all ye fowls of the air, bless ye the Lord.

O all ye beasts and cattle, bless ye the Lord: O ye children of men, bless ye the Lord.

Oh, let Israel bless the Lord: praise Him and magnify Him forever.

*cula* (Daniel 3, [55,] 56, Vulgate; compare "The Evening Suffrages" in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, p. 115).—In the Latin rite *Benedicite* is used as part of the psalmody at lauds on Sundays and feasts, at the funerals of little children as the procession returns from the grave to the church, and as part of the private thanksgiving after mass. In the Book of Common Prayer *Benedicite* is an alternate to the *Te Deum* at Morning Prayer ("Mattins").

O ye priests of the Lord, bless ye the Lord: O ye servants of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.

O ye spirits and souls of the righteous, bless ye the Lord: O ye holy and humble men of heart, bless ye the Lord.

Bless we the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost: Let us praise Him and magnify Him forever.

## II

Unless he has been forewarned, the student who pages about in the second volume of the Rahlfs edition of the Greek Old Testament is in for a mild shock. For here he will suddenly come upon fourteen Odes sandwiched between the Psalms and the Proverbs. The last of these Odes contains the Greek version of the unmistakably Christian hymn, "We praise thee, we bless thee, we worship thee," that he has been singing at celebrations of the Holy Communion for years.<sup>17</sup>

The song was old in the early fifth century, when the scribe or scribes who gave us the 800 stout pages of the Codex Alexandrinus of the Septuagint copied it from a still older manuscript.<sup>18</sup> It was old when the Nestorian liturgy took form after the breach came between the church in the Empire and the church in Persia following

the Council of Ephesus of 431.<sup>19</sup> It was already old when the unnamed compiler of the Apostolic Constitutions put them together in the fourth century.<sup>20</sup>

We know it was old because each of these three sources contains texts of the hymn sufficiently different to imply decades if not generations of previous use in worship.

In the West the *Laudamus te* had become so deeply rooted in a Latin translation that, when the 13th canon of the Fourth Council of Toledo in 633 forbade the use in the service of any hymn produced by mere human effort,<sup>21</sup> no one even thought of applying this directive to the *Laudamus te*.

The earliest form in which the hymn has survived in Latin is contained in a late seventh-century manuscript. The differences between it and the form familiar to us are quite minor. The first part reads: "We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we magnify Thee, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory, O Lord, the heavenly King, God the Father Almighty, O Lord, the only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, O Holy Spirit of God. And we all say: Amen." Then, like the version we know, it ad-

<sup>17</sup> Ode 14, lines 4—28, in Alfred Rahlfs (editor), *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Württembergische Bibelanstalt, c. 1935), II, 182.

<sup>18</sup> We may have an allusion to at least the opening lines of the hymn in the *Apology* (between 124 and 161) of Aristides, XV, in J. Rendel Harris, *The Apology of Aristides on Behalf of the Christians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1891), p. 49, lines 31—32; see Henri Leclercq, "Hymnes," in Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq (editors), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie*, VI (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1925), 2838.

<sup>19</sup> A German translation of the Nestorian or "East Syrian" version is given by Josef Andreas Jungmann, *Missarum sollemnia*, 2d ed. (Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1949), I, 430, 431, on the basis of A. J. Maclean, *East Syrian Daily Offices* (London: Rivington, Percival and Co., 1894), pp. 170 f.

<sup>20</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, VII, 47; text printed in Jungmann, *ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> John Dominic Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, new ed. (Florence: Antonius Zatta, 1758—1798), X, 622, 623.

dresses itself to the sin-bearing Son and Lamb of God.

This combination of Trinitarian praise and Christocentric appeal is sound theology. In the very structure of our hymn we have an echo of and a response to the Pauline greeting that is the second verse of so many of the Apostle's letters: "Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." As recipients of divine grace and peace we hail the Holy Trinity on high and the Son of God on earth with us below.

"When one stands at the altar, let prayer always be directed to the Father," the old canon ran.<sup>22</sup> But no man can come to the Father except through Christ the Lord. No man's praises are borne aloft to the altar on high in the sight of the divine majesty except in union with the perfect offering of God's beloved Son. In Him first we and then our offerings have been made acceptable.

The church's words of praise come tumbling out in this hymn: We praise, we bless, we worship, we glorify, we give thanks—all for Thy great glory. This is the cry of a congregation awestruck less by the divine majesty than by the divine charity. Here is not the consuming aspect of the divine glory that was like devouring fire on the top of the holy mountain in Exodus 24. Here is not the oppressive aspect of the divine glory which in the form of the bright blue Shekinah by its overpowering splendor crowded the ministers of the first temple at the dedication into the vulgar courtyard (1 Kings 8).

<sup>22</sup> Council of Hippo (393), canon 21, Mansi, III, 922; Third Council of Carthage (397), canon 23, Mansi, III, 884.

Here is the aspect of glory of God that we have beheld with the fourth evangelist, the glory full of the undeserved mercy and of the endlessly persistent divine faithfulness to His covenant. It is the glory of a loving God in the human, compassionate, thorn-shadowed face of Jesus Christ, tormented by the weight of the cross and the burden of the whole world's transgressions. Only this mystery possesses the fascination that can turn our face away from ourselves and wholly toward God in praise. If there is any self-regard voiced here it is the joy that of His limitless condescension He has accounted us worthy to stand before Him in this priestly service and to worship Him not as we ought but as we are able. This accent is highlighted by the names with which we salute Him—the Lord of the hosts on high, the King of heaven's endless reaches, God the Father and the All-Ruler.

One could possibly lament the loss of the reference to the Holy Spirit at this point in our present version. It would have completed the Trinitarian confession, but the exclusion of a reference to the Holy Spirit here has made possible the reconstruction of the second part of the hymn with the unaffected and innocent artfulness upon which more than one analysis of it has remarked—the acclamatory address to the Son, the litany-like invocation, the threefold salutation "Thou alone," and the final Trinitarian conclusion.

"Jesus Christ is Lord," the church stubbornly affirmed. At the time when this hymn came into being Christ's unique Lordship was being challenged as much as it is now by secular rivals, with unlimited claims upon the total love and the complete loyalty of their political subjects.

Christ is the Only-Begotten, the church affirmed and affirms, the one who is wholly by nature what even in Him we can hope to become only in part and only by grace. Christ is the Son of the Father, although His own people after the flesh might call it blasphemy to say so and heretics might deny it. Christ is the undistorted Mirror of the glory of God. Christ is the Model of the Father's nature down to the last and up to the ultimate detail, as a seal impression precisely corresponds to the die of the ring that made it. Christ is the Word through whom all things were made, without whom nothing was made, in whom that which has been made is life, who upholds the universe by the word of His power, in whom the cosmos hangs together.

Christ is the Lamb of God that takes away with generous inclusiveness the sins of the world. It is on the basis of this universal grace that we can petition: "Have mercy upon *us*, receive *our* prayer." The pleas of the *Laudamus te* are unlike the intransitive *Kyrie eleison*, which is altogether acclamation, more a divine hurrah than a cry for compassion.<sup>23</sup> These pleas have an object; they are the obtrusive hat-shaking solicitation of needy beggars, the pleading of whole congregations of members of the Order of Blind Bartimaeus of Jericho: "Have mercy upon *us*, receive *our* prayer." When we follow reverend custom and bow our heads at "receive *our* prayer," this is but suiting the action to the word as we lay our needs, known and unknown, and deposit our burdens, felt and some-

times the greater because we no longer feel them, at the feet of the Mediator.

This said, we once more hurl our defy at His rivals. "*Thou* only art holy," sang the ancient church. Thou—and not the myriad unholy deities of the national and the ethnic and the mystery religions. "*Thou* only art the Lord," she cried (1 Cor. 8:6). Thou—not the *basileus*, not the *Augustus*, not the emperor; at most he can take our life in this world if we withhold our *sacramentum*, but he can neither confer nor take away life in the world to come. "*Thou* only art glorious," she exulted, not with the glitter and the glamor and the pomp of empire, but with the secret glory, the uncreated and transfiguring light, the unearthly brightness that Christ shares with the Father and the Holy Ghost. (John 17:5; Phil. 2:11)

Where did this formula come from? Possibly it harks back to Psalm 83:18, "Let them know that Thou alone, whose name is the Lord, art the Most High over all the earth" (RSV). We know that the church applied this passage with conscious purpose to Christ against the heretical insistence that only the Father could be called the Most High. But there may be another echo here. When the noncommunicants—the inquirers, the catechumens, and those under discipline—had been dismissed, the great intercessions had been said, the great thanksgiving had been offered, and the consecration had taken place, the bishop invited the congregation to the Holy Communion with the ritual cry: *Ta hagia tois hagiois* ["The Holy Things to the holy ones"]. And from very early times the congregation responded: "One is holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ, in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

<sup>23</sup> See Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "Three Words in Our Worship: Devotional Reflections," in this journal, XXXII (1961), 391–394.



(*Heis hágios, heis kýrios, Iēsous Christós, eis dóxan theōū patrós*)."<sup>24</sup>

All this translates into our contemporary situation very easily. Our problem is not to sing, but to live, this hymn.

Failures there have always been. About the time that this hymn was being written, on June 17, A.D. 250, during the persecution of Decius, three Christians — a shepherd and his two children — preferred to mute their song and presented a pathetic little papyrus petition, preserved in the University of Michigan collection at Ann Arbor, to some local officials in Egypt. It read: "To the officials in charge of sacrifices, from Aurelius Sakis of the village Theoxenis, with his children Aion and Heras, temporarily residents in the village Theadelphia. We have always been constant in sacrificing to the gods, and now too, in your presence, in accordance with the regulations, we have sacrificed and poured libations and tasted the offerings, and we ask you to certify this for us below. May you continue to prosper!" And under it we have the endorsement in the officials' hand: "We, Aurelius Serenus and [Aurelius] Hermas, saw you sacrificing."<sup>25</sup> The danger of martyrdom was over for

Aurelius Sakis and Aion and Hermas; they had their lives. But they no longer had a song!

For all the times when those outside the holy community could say of us, "We saw you sacrificing," let us penitently implore the forgiveness of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And in the assurance that He has heard our prayer, let us sing gladly in praise of God and of Him who sits in the unity of the Holy Ghost at the right of the Father:

We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we worship Thee, we glorify Thee, we give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory, O Lord God, heavenly King, God the Father Almighty.

O Lord, the only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, O Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.

Thou that takest away the sin of the world, receive our prayer.

Thou that sittest at the right hand of God the Father, have mercy upon us.

For Thou only art holy.

Thou only art the Lord.

Thou only, O Christ, with the Holy Ghost, art most high in the glory of God the Father. Amen.

### III

Every knowledgeable Christian understands what is meant by the term "the Catholic (or Ecumenical) Creeds" — the so-called Apostles' Creed, the so-called Nicene Creed, and the so-called Athanasian Creed. A knowledgeable Lutheran probably also knows the title under which these three symbols are bracketed in the Book of Concord of 1580: "The three chief sym-

<sup>24</sup> So, for instance, in the Clementine Liturgy, in C. E. Hammond, *Liturgies Eastern and Western* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1878), p. 21. For other references see Jungmann, I, 439, nr. 36. — At the words "with the Holy Ghost" it is customary to make the sign of the holy cross upon oneself.

<sup>25</sup> Translation of Arthur E. R. Boak and John Garrett Winter in John Garrett Winter (editor), *Papyri in the University of Michigan: Miscellaneous Papyri* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1936), pp. 132, 133. See too the similar *libellus*, also from the Decian persecution, on pp. 134, 135.

bols or confessions of the faith of Christ used unanimously in the church." <sup>26</sup>

The obvious source of this title is a 48-page brochure which Bl. Martin Luther wrote in 1537, but which the financial straits of his Wittenberg printer kept from being published until 1538. The title of this work reads: *The Three Symbols or Confessions of the Faith of Christ Used Unanimously in the Church*.<sup>27</sup> When you look at this pamphlet, however, you soon discover that the second creed is the so-called Creed of St. Athanasius, and that of the third creed Luther says: "The third symbol is supposed to be St. Augustine's and St. Ambrose's and to have been sung after St. Augustine's baptism. Whether that be true or not, no harm is done if one believes it to have been the case. For whoever the author is, it is a fine symbol or confession, written in the form of a canticle to enable us not only to confess the true faith but also to give thanks to God in the process." <sup>28</sup>

The elevation of this hymn to symbolical status in the Reformer's mind did not involve any depreciation of the so-called Nicene Creed; Luther appends to his work a translation of the Nicene Creed, which, he says, "is sung at Holy Communion every Sunday." <sup>29</sup>

So far as Luther's evaluation of the *Te*

*Deum* is concerned, it commands concurrence, even though we know that the legend of its composition by SS. Ambrose and Augustine is a pious fabrication. This legend has not been traced back beyond the days of Charlemagne in the late eighth century and it evolved into full flower in a Milanese chronicle only some three hundred years later.<sup>30</sup>

Like many legends, however, it has a kernel of truth. We do not know the author of "We praise Thee, O Lord." We know only that it goes back at least to the last half of the fifth century, when St. Caesarius of Arles (470?—542), as a monk of the Mediterranean island monastery of Lérins, became familiar with it as part of the Sunday worship there. But recent researches make it clear that this canticle is in its origin really a baptismal hymn, a fragment that has become detached from an ancient French liturgy for the administration of Holy Baptism on the eve of Easter.

So that our reflection on the *Te Deum* may help to remind us to praise God for our own baptism, I invite you to look at it a little more closely on the basis of the original Latin. The division into four parts is fairly obvious. Like the *Laudamus te*, it opens with a paean of praise to the Holy Trinity. Again like the *Laudamus te*, the second part, beginning "Thou art the King of glory, O Christ," is addressed to the incarnate Lord, and recites the great acts by which He has redeemed us from our dreadful destiny. With the verse that begins, "We therefore pray thee," we begin a reworking of an ancient offertory collect

<sup>26</sup> Hans Lietzmann and Ernst Wolf (editors), *Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche herausgegeben im Gedenkjahr der Augsburger Konfession 1930*, 4th ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1959), p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Böhlau Nachfolger, 1883—), 50, 255.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 263, 6—11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 50, 282, 29.

<sup>30</sup> Ernst Kähler, *Studien zum Te Deum und zur Geschichte des 24. Psalms in der alten Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, c. 1958), pp. 111—113.

with which the hymn originally concluded.<sup>31</sup> The fourth part, beginning "Day by day we magnify Thee," is a series of versicles and responses from the Psalms that the early church attached to a number of devotions.

We can best envision the structure of the first part in praise of the Trinity by visualizing a great letter X, with the "Holy, Holy, Holy" at the point where the two strokes cross. We begin by pointing to the adoration which the whole cosmos—"all the earth," as our English version puts it—offers to the eternal Father-Creator. The number of the adoring angels next pointed to is vast, of course, myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands (Rev. 5:11), but of necessity fewer than the whole number of creatures in the universe. Fewer still respectively are the heavenly spirits in the angelic choirs referred to as "heavens" and "powers." With the cherubim we come down to a mere four, and with the seraphim to only two.<sup>32</sup> At the very summit of the heavenly militia, these lead all creation in the cry that Isaiah heard within the temple in the year that King Uzziah died: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts, heaven and earth are full of Thy glory." (Isaiah 6:1-3)

So far the number of worshipers in each ascending rank has decreased; the process reverses itself as we turn from the army of heaven to the Christian soldiers of earthly birth. Highest and least numerous is the glorious chorus of the twelve apostles. Next, in a formula that harks back to the time when "prophet" was a rank in the Christian ministry, comes the praise-

worthy number of the prophets. (The "goodly fellowship" of our English version conceals the point that *numerus* is a technical military term for a detachment.) Then, still staying with the military metaphor, we have the white-robed army, or, possibly more precisely, the white-robed infantry, of the martyrs, the heavenly Kyrios' counterpart to the white-robed guardsmen who protected the earthly emperor's person. Finally, we have the countless members of Christ's holy church throughout all the earth, the ecumenical community of Word and sacraments and faith and witness, evermore praising the Father of limitless majesty, worshiping His adorable, true, and unique Son, and glorifying the Holy Ghost, the Paraclete.

Now the worshipers address themselves to Christ. The early church, be it remembered, understood and used Psalm 24 liturgically to commemorate Christ's victorious conquest of death and Hades,<sup>33</sup> so it is quite natural that the *Te Deum* hails Him as "King of Glory," who came to liberate men from the tyranny of their ancient enemies. Luther's *Baptismal Book* in the Small Catechism focuses on two aspects of our Lord's redemptive work by asking: "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, who was born and suffered?"<sup>34</sup> The *Te Deum* fixes on four: (1) In order to take on our humanity, You did not shrink from the womb of the Virgin. (2) In order to open the kingdom of heaven to all who believe on You, You vanquished death's sting by Your triumphant conquest of the netherworld. (3) In order to share in all the divine might and power as man as well

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 95—115.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 43—64.

<sup>34</sup> Par. 24; *Bekenntnisschriften*, p. 540.

as God, You sit on the right hand of God the Father. (4) In order to vindicate Your people and to claim Your own, we believe that You will come hereafter as Judge.

Now comes the petition — humble, pleading no merit, claiming no rights, confiding wholly in the demonstrated divine piety: "We pray You, help the members of Your household, whom You have ransomed with Your precious Blood. Along with all Your holy ones, make us recipients of the gift of eternal glory. Save Your people, O Lord" — and at this point the canticle quotes literally from Psalm 29:11 — "and bless Your inheritance, reign over them Yourself and lift them up forever."

This is the spoken or unspoken prayer at every baptism, and the *Te Deum*, remember, is a baptismal hymn. But baptism is more than a onetime act. It signifies, as Bl. Martin Luther reminds us, that by *daily* contrition and repentance the Old Adam surviving in us should be drowned and die with all his sins and his evil desires, and again the new man formed in us by Baptism should *daily* come forth and arise to live in God's sight in righteousness and purity forever. So the closing Psalm verses are appended to make the great Easter vigil hymn a daily prayer for the grace that only God can supply: "Day after day we bless You and we worship Your name forever and ever. Deign, O Lord, to keep us without sin just for today; have mercy on us as we have hoped in You."

Then, at the very end, comes the singular and subjunctive plea that is really an affirmation of unshakable personal faith in the God who never forsakes His covenant: "I have put my hope in You, O Lord, let me not be put to shame forever."

Whenever we lift up our hearts in the *Te Deum*, praising God and confessing Him to be our Lord, let us recall our own baptism and what we there renounced and what we there confessed.

We praise Thee, O God; we acknowledge Thee to be the Lord.

All the earth doth worship Thee, the Father everlasting.

To Thee all angels cry aloud, the heavens and all the powers therein.

To Thee cherubim and seraphim continually do cry:

Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory.

The glorious company of the Apostles praise Thee.

The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise Thee.

The noble army of martyrs praise Thee.

The holy Church throughout all the world doth acknowledge Thee:

The Father of an infinite majesty, Thine adorable true and only Son, also the Holy Ghost, the Comforter.

Thou art the King of Glory, O Christ.

Thou art the everlasting Son of the Father.

When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man, Thou didst humble Thyself to be born of a virgin.<sup>35</sup>

When Thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, Thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

Thou sittest at the right hand of God in the glory of the Father.

<sup>35</sup> In addition to being a prudish bowdlerism this rendering is also theologically equivocal. The 16th-century English version is both more accurate and theologically more satisfactory. "When Thou tookest upon Thee to deliver man, Thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb."

We believe that Thou shalt come to be our Judge.

We therefore pray Thee, help Thy servants, whom Thou hast redeemed with Thy precious blood.

Make them to be numbered <sup>36</sup> with Thy saints in glory everlasting.

O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine heritage; govern them and lift them up forever.

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<sup>36</sup> The original text probably read *munerari* for the *numerari* on which the English translation is based, and omitted the *in* before *gloria*. The translation of this earlier text would read: "Make them to be endowed with everlasting glory together with all Thy saints."

Day by day we magnify Thee, and we worship Thy name ever, world without end.

Vouchsafe, O Lord, to keep us this day without sin.

O Lord, have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us.

O Lord, let Thy mercy be upon us, as **our trust is in Thee**.

O Lord, in Thee have I trusted; let me never be confounded.<sup>37</sup>

St. Louis, Mo.

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<sup>37</sup> The Biblical sources of the last five verses are Ps. 28:9; 145:2; 123:3a; 33:22; 31:1 (or 71:1).