

“Hail, O holy mother, the child-bearer who has brought forth the King, who rules both heaven and earth through the ages.” While most of us are used to singing an opening hymn at Mass, in fact the oldest and most traditional form of entrance for Mass is called an Introit, also known as an Entrance Antiphon. The object of the Introit was to accompany the entrance, and almost always consists of a phrase from the psalms, as ordered by the early popes. Since there was no reason for continuing once the celebrant reached the altar, they soon became truncated to one or two verses.

I am delighted that the Cathedral maintains the custom of regularly singing the Introit, along with entrance hymns. I am particularly pleased because today’s Introit is extremely rare in that it begins with two lines, neither from Scripture nor written by a saint— but from a 5th century poet by the name of Sedulius. Hardly a household name—he was a convert, possibly a monk, and thoroughly steeped in the faith of the Church.

The key section of Sedulius’ poem reads¹:

63 Hail, O holy mother; the child-bearer who has brought forth the King
 64 Who *holds heaven and earth through the ages, whose
 65 Name and Dominion embrace everything in its course,
 66 Endures without end; In whose blessed womb
 67 You hold a mother's joy, while you enjoy the honor of virginity.
 68 No woman like you was seen before, nor did one appear after;
 69 You alone, without comparison, were the woman who pleased Christ.

¹ 63 *Salve, sancta parens, enixa puerpera regem,* 64 *Qui caelum terramque tenet per saecula, cuius* 65 *Nomen et aeterno conplectens omnia gyro* 66 *Imperium sine fine manet; quae ventre beato* 67 *Gaudia matris habens cum virginitatis honore* 68 *Nec primam similem visa es nec habere sequentem:* 69 *Sola sine exemplo placuisti femina Christo.* (Carmen Paschale, II, 63-69) N.B.* The Introit substitutes *regit* (rules) for *tenet* (holds).

These lines could rightfully be seen as a “virtual synthesis of all Mariology,” as it existed in the 5th century.² It is all there in those seven lines: Mary’s divine motherhood, her virginity, her exceptional holiness, and the grace of her divine election. Even the Gregorian melody of the Introit, haunting and deliberate in both its tone and pace, evokes the contemplative aspect of this Feast. Mary, Mother of God, first among women, is appropriately honored on the first day of the new year of Our Lord 2013.

Our second reading from Galatians reminds us: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, [t]o ransom those under the law, [s]o that we might receive adoption as sons.” Indeed, she ransoms us, she who brought forth the King. We can echo with Sedulius that, “No woman like you was seen before, nor did one appear after.”

Later in the poem, Sedulius introduces us to the comparison of the Blessed Mother to the Rose, arguably nature’s most beautiful flower:

As the tender rose springs up among prickly thorns
But does not offend in any way, since its beauty obscures
its thorny branches,
So holy Mary, the new virgin descending
from the branch of Eve,
Makes pure the old virgin’s offense.³

The rose represented beauty, the season of spring and love.⁴ In Scripture Mary was associated with the passage from the Song of Songs: “I am the Rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys.” (Song 2:1). Dante noted of Mary: “There is the Rose, in which the Word of

² (cf. Rev. Luigi Gambero, *Mary and the Fathers of the Church: The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought*; trans. from the original Italian by Ignatius Press, pub. 1999, p. 289)

³ Sedulius, *Carmen Paschale, II, 28-31*. English trans. Gambero, *op. cit.*, p. 284

⁴ “The Christian Symbolism of the Rose,” Rev. Theodore Koehler, S.M. University of Dayton, Ohio

God took on flesh, and there the lilies are whose fragrance led mankind down the good path.” ...”⁵ All of this symbolism served to solidify her unique and exalted place in salvation history, carried out in humility and in absolute conformity with the will of God.

Today our gaze turns towards Mary as mother, she who has made possible our joy, our hope and our redemption by means of her unequivocal “Yes” to God. Indeed, she leads us down the good path, the path to holiness and purity, the path of acceptance of God’s will in our lives, not counting the cost of discipleship.

The title of Mary as “child bearer” is itself exceedingly appropriate, as the earliest artistic motifs of Mary depict her cradling Jesus gently on her lap. She bore him not only on Christmas morning, but her tender gaze remained fixed upon our Lord throughout his infancy and childhood, ever striving to be a loving mother according to her humble vocation.

Today, let us re-commit ourselves to being witnesses to the world of the manifold gift of a Savior, brought forth through the singular cooperation of a woman filled with grace. As we commemorate the beginning of a new Civil Year, we beg God’s blessing and protection upon our endeavors and upon our nation. We beg also for the maternal intercession of the *sancta parens*, the holy woman who desires nothing more now than to lead us to her Son.

As we look ahead to 2013, let us face the challenges of our day and this year in a spirit of faith and hope. May Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all seasons and of all time, bless us this day and all throughout the new year.

⁵ Dante, *Paradiso*. 23.73-4