Francis Thompson the Poet of Modern Catholicity

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FRANCIS THOMPSON THE POET OF MODERN CATHOLICITY

BY

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PREFACE

Despite the fact that there is a larger bibliography on Francis Thompson than on practically any other poet of the Catholic Literary Revival, one phase of his work has been scarcely touched upon -- his relation to the liturgy of the Church. To the student of the present day this aspect is of particular interest because of the growth of the liturgical movement within the last few decades. The present study purposes to make a survey of Thompson's use of liturgical sources, though it does not pretend to be exhaustive.

To Mr. James J. Young of Loyola University, under whose direction the study was made, the writer makes grateful acknowledgment.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I DEFINITIONS AND AIMS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF THOMPSON</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III THE CHRISTOCENTRIC UNIVERSE IN THOMPSON'S POETRY</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV THE LITURGICAL SOURCES OF THOMPSON'S LANGUAGE</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V AN ESTIMATE OF THOMPSON AS POET OF MODERN CATHOLICITY</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER ONE
DEFINITIONS AND AIMS

In the title FRANCIS THOMPSON THE POET OF MODERN CATHOLICITY the phrase "Modern Catholicity" immediately attracts attention and perhaps calls forth the question, "Is not Catholicity of its very nature for all times as well as for all people?" This is true, and Church history reveals the fact that just because the Catholic Church is for all times and for all people she is marked with a stamp for each succeeding age which bears a distinguishing characteristic peculiar to that age. Thus the insignia of the early Christian era are the beautiful example of brotherly love and the sowing of the seeds of faith in the blood of countless martyrs. The early Middle Ages are distinguished by the founding of the great monastic orders; the later medieval period, by the origin of great universities as well as by outstanding contributions of art and architecture. To the Renaissance belong the masterpieces of philosophy that resulted from the revival of classical art and learning. Even the days of "the great revolt" boast of a glorious side. On the continent this is the age of new religious orders, devoted particularly to teaching and preaching; in England it is the era of martyrs, the fruit of which belongs to post-Reformation days, the period of Catholic ascendency in the bitter struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. Future ages will find the chapter on present-day Church history entitled "The Great Liturgical Revival."
The liturgical movement is as old as the Church itself, for liturgy is nothing else than the official worship of the Church. It is the divine worship which the Church, the mystical body of Christ, offers to God the Father in union with Christ, its Head. It consists in the celebration and application of Christ's redemption, enacted by the general and special priesthood in the form of the Mystery Drama.¹

This movement rests on the foundation of the oneness of all men in Christ, or, as it is more generally called, the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ. This doctrine is the most revolutionary one that could be given to the world. It presents a truth that is nearest the cravings, instinctive and acquired, of the human heart. It shows God in all His love and tender fatherliness, bending to a gracious union with His own children. Whoever understands the doctrine of the mystical body cannot refrain from bursting into a song of exultant happiness: "I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me."

Both the doctrine of the mystical body and the liturgical movement are directed against the subjectivism and egoism that have worked havoc in the modern world. In temporal affairs the modern individual strives chiefly for himself; in religion, too, he has gone his own way, forgetful of the Christian community, the whole of which he is a part. At the turn of the century Pius X, realizing the sad consequences of this lack of Christian social consciousness, sent out a plea which became the watchword of the liturgical movement:

Our most ardent desire being that the true Christian spirit flourish again in every way and maintain itself among the faithful, it is necessary to provide above all for the sanctity of the temple of God, where the faithful unite precisely for the purpose of finding this spirit at its primary and indispensable source, which is the active participation in the public and solemn prayer of the Church.²

In November, 1903, His Holiness made a similar statement:

Public worship is the primary and indispensable source of the true Christian spirit, and the faithful will be filled with this spirit only in proportion as they actively participate in the sacred mysteries and public and solemn prayer of the Church.³

Pope Pius XI also placed the seal of his approval on the liturgical movement. He remarks that

The endeavor to recall the piety of the faithful to a better understanding of the official prayer of the Church and to a greater participation in such a rich spiritual treasure is not something new; for already the words of Pius X of happy memory opened up and pointed out a secure and fruitful path in this matter.⁴

Then he adds:

Today it is still necessary to reawaken a live interest in and affection for the sacred liturgy.⁵

He hails in advance

... a not distant return of the great Catholic family to that loving and intelligent participation in the sacred liturgy of the Church which is of such

² Virgil Michel, O.S.B., The Liturgy of the Church, 18.
³ Caspar Lefebvre, O.S.B., Catholic Liturgy, 12.
⁵ Ibid., 56.
great value for a safe and perfect Christian formation
and for the fostering of a solid faith and piety in
all conditions of life."

This brief survey of the ideas of only two recent popes makes it
evident why the characteristic of modern Catholicity is the revival of
interest in the liturgy. A more detailed study of this movement (such as
is beyond the scope of this paper) would convince Christianity that

A civilization in which Catholics are closely knit
together by a frequent and common sharing in the
mysteries of their religion, Mass (including Holy
Communion) above all others, and then go forth to
exemplify Christian virtues to the world -- that
was the picture Pius X held up to our twentieth
century for realization.

What has Francis Thompson to do with this revival of interest in
the liturgy? Edmund G. Gardner⁸ in his essay "The Poetry of Mr. Francis
Thompson," written in 1898,⁹ confers the title "epic poet of modern
Catholicity" on Thompson and uses Shelley's definition of "epic poet" to
clarify the name. Mr. Gardner writes:

Mr. Thompson has written at once the most richly
coloured and the most austere poetry of the age.
The keynote is finely struck in ten lines addressed
to another poet, almost at the opening of his first
volume:

6 Ibid., 57.
7 Gerald Ellard, S.J., "Pius Tenth and the New Liturgy," Orate Fratres,
I (1926-1927), 244.
8 Born in 1869 and educated at Beaumont and Caius College, Cambridge,
Edmund G. Gardner is one of the best-known authorities, outside Italy,
on Dante and other Italian poets. He abandoned research in Italian
archives to devote himself to the study of mysticism. He is the
author of Dante's Ten Heavens, A Dante Primer, The Story of Florence,
and The King of Court Poets.
9 Month, XCI (1898), 131-41.
A poet who could adequately accomplish this in a single great work, would be in very truth almost a second Dante, and succeed where Tasso failed. He would give to Christendom another sacred poem to which both heaven and earth have set their hand, and would eventually stand out in the history of human thought as the epic poet of modern Catholicity, using the term "epic poet," not in its more strict sense, but in that in which Shelley employed it in his Defense of Poetry to distinguish Homer, Dante, and Milton: a "poet, the series of whose creations bore a defined and intelligible relation to the knowledge and sentiment and religion of the age in which he lived, and of the ages which followed it, developing itself in correspondence with their development."

Father Calvert Alexander, S.J., in commenting on the last section of Edmund Gardner's quotation, has suggested the plan for this thesis. He has given in succinct form what the present study purposes to work out in more detail. He remarks:

If we are to give Francis Thompson the title of the "epic poet of modern Catholicity" it will be chiefly, I think, because he displays himself in the New Poems as the poet of the liturgy; and liturgy is the most unique expression of modern Catholicity.

Thompson has frequently been called a "liturgical poet," sometimes for no better reason than that he makes use of metaphors, such as "blanch-amiced clouds," "solemn thurifer," "twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte," and the like, borrowed from ecclesiastical

ritual, and plastered upon the face of nature as a sort of rhetorical cosmetic. Had he done no more than this, the title would be a resounding misnomer. But despite Thompson's love of exotic imagery, it must be insisted that he did not apply the language of the liturgy to nature because it was exotic but because it was native; it seemed to him the most apt language in which to express the elevated position enjoyed not only by man but by infra-rational creation in the New Dispensation. In a word, he had grasped the reality behind the symbolism of the ritual, he had seen how Christ the Pontifex, the bridge-builder between heaven and earth, had raised up that which was cast down, and had united things, long disparate and warring; he had had a clear vision of a Christocentric universe. It was this that made him a liturgical poet, this and the decision to apply to all things the language of the Sacrifice which made real this surpassing unity and oneness of all things.11

From this it can be seen that there are really two phases to consider: the emphasis on a Christocentric universe and the application of the language of the liturgy to all things. Hence in order to establish Thompson's position as "Poet of Modern Catholicity," chapter two will examine the place of religion in the poet's life and thought. In chapter three his poetry will be studied in the light of the Christocentric universe it portrays. The liturgical sources of Thompson's language -- the Mass, Benediction, the sacraments and sacramentals -- will be treated in chapter four. Finally, in chapter five, will follow a critical estimate of Thompson as poet of modern Catholicity.

CHAPTER TWO
THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN THE LIFE AND THOUGHT OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

The clash between religion and science in which all thinkers of the later nineteenth century were engaged is reflected not only in the philosophical writings of the age but also in its poetry. If scientists began to recognize that religion is as much a fact as the earth itself and if religious thinkers adapted what was valuable in the formative ideas of induction and development to the spiritual life, poets found new themes in both the clash and its various solutions. Among the philosophical poets of the nineties, the name of Francis Thompson is outstanding, for he stated in a unique way the "burden of Victorian inquiry and speculation and gave a solution explicitly mystical, obviously Christian, and implicitly Catholic."¹ His solution was none other than the fundamental truth which Augustine of Hippo had uttered centuries before: "Whithersoever the soul of man turns itself, unless to Thee, it cleaves unto sorrow; yea, even though it cleave to the fairest things ..." But because Thompson stated this truth in poetry peculiar for its strangeness, splendor, and spaciousness of imagery, its purity of thought, and its mastery of the sublime, he has aroused admiration even where he has failed to convince.

Francis Thompson's life was, and his works are, penetrated by a

consciousness of the supernatural. To him the world and human life were "crammed with Heaven and aflame with God." What gave him this spiritual outlook on life? His father, Doctor Charles Thompson, was a convert, to whom religion became a passion. His mother, also a convert, had at one time cherished the desire of becoming a nun. Several of his cousins were nuns, and his sister Mary became Mother Austin. A cousin, Miss Agnes Martin, writes of him:

From his father he inherited his passion for religion and from what I know of his poetry, I find he has expressed thoughts and yearnings habitual to other members of his father's family."

Heredity can thus explain the spiritual tendencies of Thompson's mind. The outward influences that molded these tendencies were three: his training at Ushaw, his knowledge and appreciation of the Bible, and his sojourn at the Capuchin Friary at Pantasaph.

The seven years he spent at the seminary stamped his after life deeply with a religious atmosphere. In a very special sense he assimilated the religious teaching which he received at Ushaw. Because he was preparing for the priesthood, he shared in the ceremonies of the seminary and college, learned the hymns of the Church, and acquired a knowledge of the missal. It was here that he fed "his imagination with the processions, tapers, decorated altars, Marian hymns, all the richly significant acted poetry of the liturgy."3

He was orthodox through and through, from within, from beneath, outward to his acts, upward to his poetry.

2 Everard Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, 3.
Though it was not his lot to receive a call to the priesthood, his verses are, oftener than any other poet's, vestment-clad and odorous of the incense of the sanctuary. If, as has been said by one, his poetry is spiritual even to a fault, it must be a 'fault', the glory, doubtless, of his Alma Mater.

The religious bent of Thompson, which had been nurtured by his training at Ushaw, received a further impetus in his later years through his study of the Bible. Thompson himself has left a record of the various phases of that study and of its influence on his poetry:

The Bible as an influence from the literary standpoint has a late but important date in my life. As a child I read it, but for its historical interest. Nevertheless even then I was greatly, though vaguely, impressed by the mysterious imagery, the cloudy grandeurs, of the Apocalypse. Deeply uncomprehended, it was, of course, the pageantry of an appalling dream; insurgent darkness, with wild lights flashing through it; terrible phantasms, insupportably revealed against profound light, and in a moment no more; on the earth hurrying to and fro, like insects of the earth at a sudden candle; unknown voices uttering out of darkness darkened and disastrous speech; and all this in motion and turmoil, like the sands of a fretted pool. Such is the Apocalypse as it inscribes itself on the verges of my childish memory. In early youth it again drew me to itself, giving to my mind a permanent shaping direction. In maturer years Ecclesiastes (casually opened during a week of solitude in the Fens) masterfully affected a temperament in key with its basic melancholy. But not till quite later years did the Bible as a whole become an influence. Then, however, it came with decisive power, but not as it had influenced most writers. My style, being already formed, could receive no evident impress from it: its vocabulary had come to me through the great writers of our language. In the first place its influence was mystical; it revealed to me a whole scheme of existence, and lit up life like a lantern.

Fresh from his study of the Bible, Thompson found in the earth a joyous

4 John Thomson, Francis Thompson the Preston-Born Poet, 25.

5 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 172-3.
David, dancing all the day before the sun, Incarnate Light; in the pale light of the moon he saw fallen Eve; in the first beam of sunrise, the Ave of the Annunciation.  

Not until his sojourn at the Capuchin monastery in Wales, however, did religious thought attain to its full stature in the mind of Thompson. In 1892 he had come to the monastery in search of health. His first stay with the friars and his subsequent visits to Pantasaph gave him much more than he sought. He had come to recuperate physically; he was destined to grow spiritually. He became steeped in Catholic philosophy. He renewed the acquaintance of Lady Poverty, whom he had met under less friendly circumstances in the streets of London. Here he discussed phases of mysticism with the learned Franciscans; here, in 1894, he met Coventry Patmore, whose fervent disciple he was to become. Both poets entertained similar ideas regarding mysticism. The extent of their mutual sympathy and understanding may be gathered from two excerpts from Patmore's letters. In August, 1895, he writes to Thompson:

I see, with joy, how nearly we are upon the same lines, but our visions could not be true were they quite the same; and no one can really see anything but his own vision.  

And in November of the same year:

It is always a great thing to me to receive a letter from you. My heart goes forth to you as it goes to no other man; for are we not singularly visited by a great common delight and a great common sorrow? Is not this to be one in Christ?

7 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 221.  
8 Ibid., 221.
In the light of Thompson's background and experience, it is not surprising that his conception of the poet should be a mystical one. "A mystic," writes Father Geoffrey Bliss, "is one who finds no difficulty in recognizing a profound analogy between the love of God for man, and that of a bridegroom for his bride; and secondly, perceives, with an intense intellectual delight, something at least of the unity, something of the wonderful interdependence of the dogmas of the Catholic Church." In simpler terms, a mystic is one who sees the relation of all things to their ultimate end. Like the Duke in As You Like It, he

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

But he would rather change the last phrase to "God in everything." This is what Thompson requires of his ideal poet -- a striving after that rarest of attainments, the union of sanctity and song. He looks upon the vocation of a poet as a sacred calling, a sort of anointed priesthood working for the honor and glory of God. "To be the poet of the return to nature is something," he said, "but I would be the poet of the return to God." To his mind the poet's ultimate inspiration is God incarnate in Jesus Christ. "Be ye other Christs" must be the guiding maxim of the true poet, for it is his mission to give Christ to the world. In his essay "Form and Formalism" Thompson writes:

Theology and philosophy are the soul of truth; but they must be clothed with flesh, to create an organism which can come down and live among men. Therefore Christ became incarnate to create Christianity. Be it spoken with reverence, a great poet who is likewise

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9 "Francis Thompson and Richard Crashaw," Month, CXI (1908), 9.
10 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 205.
a great thinker does for truth what Christ did for God, the Supreme Truth.11

No wonder, then, that like another Isaias, Thompson "thunders out his message to the modern world, and if the world will not listen to priests, it may perchance listen to a poet and pause long enough to realize the existence of God. Under the thousands of different forms which go to make up nature, he perceives God, the Guiding Principle of all."12

If anyone fails to grasp this ideal of Thompson as a poet, he cannot hope to fathom the meaning of his poetry, for his poems are the concrete expression of his ideal. Because he would see poetry in her rightful place as "lesser sister and helpmate of the Church," he cries out to the ministers of religion:

Unrol the precedents of the Church's past; recall to your minds that Francis of Assisi was among the precursors of Dante; that sworn to Poverty he forswore not beauty, but discerned through the lamp Beauty the Light God; ... Poetry is the preacher to men of the earthly as you of the Heavenly Fairness; of that earthly fairness which God has fashioned to His own image and likeness. You proclaim the day which the Lord has made, and she exults and rejoices in it. You praise the Creator for His works, and she shows you that they are very good.13

In the beauty of nature Thompson sees a shadow of divine Beauty, and in all things earthly he finds symbols of the great truths of faith. He enters into the spirit of the Church as few other men have done. As religion was the prime force in Thompson's life, so too is it the quickening spirit of all his thought, and particularly of his poetry.

11 The Works of Francis Thompson, III, 71.
12 John Thomson, op. cit., 603.
CHAPTER THREE

THE CHRISTOCENTRIC UNIVERSE IN THOMPSON'S POETRY

Sometime during the ten weeks before his death, while he was the guest of Wilfrid Blunt, Thompson jotted in his notebook several verses, the last of his making, which were subsequently printed under the title of "Motto and Invocation" after the preface in the volume of Thompson's prose edited by Wilfrid Meynell.1 Father Terence Connolly, S.J., remarks that

In form and in point of sheer technical excellence, the worth of these verses is negligible, but as a document revealing the spirit of the poet that endured to the end, they are of the greatest importance.

Of particular interest, so far as the present study is concerned, is the motto: "Omnia per ipsum, et sine ipso nihil." In this abridged form of St. John's words3 is compressed the essence of Thompson's spirit, a spirit that associates him definitely with the liturgical movement of the present day. As this movement aims at restoring all things in Christ, the sole Mediator between God and man, so Thompson, following the apostle St. John, sees in Christ the source of all creation, whether this be the visible

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1 The Works of Francis Thompson, III.
2 Poems of Francis Thompson, 554.
3 Cf. John 1, 3: Omnia per ipsum facta sunt; et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est. -- All things were made by him; and without him was made nothing that was made.
world of nature or the invisible world of man's good deeds or the intangible but potent world of art and poetry. Christ is all in all to him: all things radiate from Christ as their center, all things return to Him as their ultimate and alone satisfying goal. He is the incarnate Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of all that ever was, is now, or ever shall be. "In Christ," Thompson writes elsewhere, "centres and is solved that supreme problem of life -- the marriage of the Unit with the Sum. In Him is perfectly shown forth the All for one and One for all, which is the justificatory essence of that substance we call Kingship; ..." It is not surprising, therefore, that Thompson's poetry as a whole is implicitly Christocentric. Indeed, such an implicit spirit may be predicated of the work of every truly Catholic poet. What distinguishes Thompson's poetry from that of other writers is the fact that he explicitly portrays a Christocentric universe in several of his poems.

The symbolic foundation of this Christocentric universe is laid in the world of nature, in that realm of earthly beauty which is "but heavenly beauty taking to itself flesh." Thompson sees in the solar system an image of the spiritual kingdom of Christ. The sun is the center of the solar system, whence light and warmth, beauty and life are radiated to natural creation; in the world of the spirit Christ is the Sun of Justice, who gives to the soul of man spiritual light and warmth, beauty and life, and who is Himself the Light that is Life, uncreated Beauty, the burning

4 "Form and Formalism," in The Works of Francis Thompson, III, 77.
furnace of divine love. This is the theme of Thompson's Christocentric universe, which is portrayed now in a single flowing phrase, again in an elaborate amplification. A detailed analysis of two poems in which this idea is most fully worked out will demonstrate not only Thompson's thought but also his poetic procedure.

The "Ode to the Setting Sun" was written in the summer of 1889, while Thompson was staying with the monks at Storrington. He himself noted that it was "begun in the field of the Cross, and under the shadow of the Cross, at sunset; finished ascending and descending Jacob's Ladder (mid or late noon?)." These external circumstances exerted a strong influence on the spirit of the poem. The field of the Cross was a section of the priory grounds at Storrington, dominated by a large cross raised on a mound. Standing in the shadow of this cross and looking westward towards the hills of Sussex, the poet would see clearly its long straight beam between him and the flaming sunset.

Terence Connolly, S.J., remarks that the general theme of the poem is expressed in a passage from Wisdom:

For by the greatness of the beauty, and of the creature, the creator of them may be seen, so as to be known thereby.

"This general theme," Father Connolly continues, "had been applied to the ecstatic 'Ode to the Sun' usually attributed to St. Francis of Assisi:

Praised be my Lord God with all His creatures, and especially our brother the sun, who brings us the day, and who brings us the light; fair is he

---

6 Everard Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, 137, footnote 1.
7 xiii, 5; cf. Terence Connolly, S.J., op. cit., 372.
and he shines with great splendour: O LORD, HE SIGNIFIES TO US THEE. 8

For Thompson the symbolism of the sun was even more specific. Later on he would cry out to Nature:

O Nature, never-done
Ungaped-at Pentecostal miracle,
We hear thee, each man in his proper tongue. 9

To Francis of Assisi the sun signified the Lord God; to his namesake of the late nineteenth century it symbolized Christ, Divinity incarnate.

Whoever would grasp the true and full meaning of the poem must in spirit stand with Thompson in the field of the Cross, must hear the soft music of violins floating "down the hushèd waters of the wind" 10 as three wandering musicians play in the village street, must see the red sun, which

... drops slowly toward the hill,
While one bird prattles that the day is done. 11

In ancient days this sun was worshipped as a god, but now it is

Discrowned of homage, though yet crowned with rays,
Hymned not at harvest more, though reapers reap. 12

Yet, the poet muses,

... in this field where the Cross planted reigns,
I know not what strange passion bows my head
To thee, whose great command upon my veins
Proves thee a god for me not dead, not dead! 13

8 Ibid., 372.

9 "From the Night of Forebeing," lines 31-3. References to Thompson's poems are to volumes 1 and 2 of The Works of Francis Thompson, edited by Wilfrid Meynell.

10 Prelude, line 2.

11 Lines 7-8.

12 Lines 11-2.

13 Lines 17-20.
He attempts to analyze this strange feeling, which is too incredulous for worship of the sun as a god, and yet too believing for doubt. Even as he ponders, his gaze is fixed on the setting sun, whose

... straight
Long beam lies steady on the Cross.... 14

In his comment on this line, Father Connolly quotes an illuminating passage from John A. Hutton's *Guidance from Francis Thompson in Matters of Faith*:

As a man sinking down into the sleep of death might, as his last conscious act, point to something ere he dies, unable to speak, but putting into that last gesture the whole intention of his soul -- its despair of things and its hope in God -- so the dying sun seems to be saying: "Before I die, once more I adjure the sons of men that there in that Cross is the only clue to life." 15

The passion of the poet, then, is the feeling of faith in Christ, typified by the sun, whose "radiant finger" points to the Cross, symbol of Christlike suffering, as the key to "bright mastership." 16

To this sun the poet now sings its own epic, a song that is

Sweet with wild things that pass, that pass away. 17

As he views the stately pageantry of the sun's setting, his thoughts hark back to the ancient days when men called the sun Hyperion, and when Giants and Titans struggled with the gods of Olympus for the mastery. Still farther back, to the first morning of creation, the poet goes, and there he sees the sun

... bursting from the great void's husk,
Leap like a lion on the throat o' the dusk. 18

---

14 Lines 24-5.
16 Lines 26, 27.
17 Line 32.
18 Lines 62-3.
He sings the sun as the "genitor that all things nourishest,"\(^{19}\) the giver of all useful and all beautiful things.\(^{20}\) While the poet has been chanting the glories and benefits of the sun in what seems almost a pagan strain, the sun itself has set, and he sees the leaden sky with no rift

Save one, where the charred firmament lets through
The scorching dazzle of Heaven; 'gainst which the hill,
   Out-flattened sombrely,
   Stands black as life against eternity.\(^ {21}\)

The word eternity suggests the solution to the mystery of the sun: it is an image of Jesus Christ,

That King-maker of Creation,
Who, ere Hellas hailed Apollo,
gave the sun its station.\(^ {22}\) Like Christ, who hung upon the Cross, so the sun day after day hangs on its rood, the western horizon. But like Christ, it rises again, and so it typifies Christ not only in His death but also in His resurrection, the proof of His divinity, and in His ascension. The last lines of the ode are, as it were, the alleluia chorus of Christ's glory, the paean in which the seeming paganism of the first stanzas is explained away. The thoughts of birth and death, which occupied the poet in the first lines of the ode proper,\(^ {23}\) recur again as he muses that Christ has "unto death His beauty given" and that, consequently,

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19 Line 78; cf. also lines 77-96.
20 Lines 97-197.
21 Lines 200-3.
22 Lines 215-8.
23 Lines 1-7.
... of all which form inheriteth
The fall doth pass the rise in worth. 24

The ode proper closes on an exultant note that is reminiscent of some of Donne's last verses on death, for in the setting sun the poet recognizes a symbol of Christ's triumph over death. Because of Christ's victory,

Till skies be fugitives,
Till Time, the hidden root of change, updries,
Are Birth and Death inseparable on earth;
For they are twain yet one, and Death is Birth. 25

If the symbolism of the sun in "Ode to the Setting Sun" is explicit in the final passage of the poem, it is even more definite in "Orient Ode," which belongs to the period during which Thompson had come under the influence of Coventry Patmore.

To persons that are familiar with Scripture and with the liturgy, the title "Orient Ode" is the key to the spirit of the poem. In Scripture Christ is frequently referred to as "the Orient," because like the sun in the east, He rose to bring light to the sin-darkened world. So the prophet Zachary records the promise of the Lord of Hosts: "for behold I will bring my servant the Orient;" 26 and again, "Behold a man, the Orient is His name." 27 Malachy, the last of the prophets, speaks of "the sun of justice" that "shall arise, and health in his wings." 28 At the dawn of the New Dispensation, Zachary, the father of the Baptist, sings a hymn of praise to

24 Lines 225-7.
26 Zachary, iii, 8.
27 Ibid., vi, 12.
28 Malachy, iv, 2.
God, through whose mercy "the Orient from on high" has visited His people. The Church chants the hymn of Zachary each day at Lauds, and in her immediate preparation for the feast of Christ's nativity she addresses Him as the Orient, the Dawn of the East, when she prays:

O Orient, brightness of the light eternal, and sun of justice, come and enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

The poem itself can be fully understood only if it is read in the light of line 195:

To thee, O Sun -- or is't perchance to Christ?

Then it appears clearly that the entire ode is not, as might be conjectured particularly from the first section, a glorification of the sun, but a hymn of praise to Christ, who is typified by the sun. Of the circumstances of its composition Thompson wrote to Patmore: "... it was written soon after Easter, and was suggested by passages in the liturgy of Holy Saturday, ..." "The most important reflection of the liturgy of Holy Saturday is found in attributing life and death, joy and sorrow, to the real Sun, Christ, and in looking upon both in the light that emanates from Him." A brief survey of the ceremonies of Holy Saturday in so far as they give expression to this idea will form an illuminating background for a detailed

30 Antiphon for December twenty-first.
31 In the first seventeen lines of the poem an elaborate metaphor based on Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. This passage will be treated in detail in chapter four, where the liturgical sources of Thompson's language are discussed.
32 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 192.
33 Terence Connolly, S.J., op. cit., 450.
study of the poem.

The services begin in darkness and in silence, for Christ, the Light of the world, has been slain, and until He rises again mankind can know only sorrow. Hence new fire is struck from a flint in the vestibule of the church. The prayers that are recited during the blessing of this fire clearly indicate its symbolism. God, who has bestowed on the faithful the fire of His brightness through His Son, now, in answer to the Church's prayer, Himself blesses the new fire and gives to men the light of His grace, that they may attain to light and life everlasting.

Bearing in his hand a taper that has been lit from this new fire, the deacon enters the church singing the praises of the light of Christ. The ceremony reaches its climax in the "Exsultet," the hymn in which the Church expounds the symbolic meaning of the paschal candle. In the name of the Church, the deacon bids the angelic choirs, the earth, and the whole Church rejoice because the darkness of the whole world is dispersed by the victory of Christ the King. It is right and just, he declares, that we proclaim the goodness of the Father and the Son, for this "is the night which purged away the darkness of sinners by the light of the pillar....

34 Cf. first collect for the blessing of the new fire: "O God, who hast bestowed on the faithful the fire of Thy brightness by Thy Son, who is the corner-stone, sanctify this new fire produced from a flint that it may be profitable to us: and grant that by this Paschal festival we may be so inflamed with heavenly desires, that with pure minds we may be able to arrive at the festival of perpetual light."

35 Cf. second collect for the blessing of the new fire: "O Lord God, Almighty Father, unfailing light, who art the author of all lights, bless this light that is blessed and sanctified by Thee, who hast enlightened the whole world: that we may be inflamed with that light and enlightened by the fire of Thy brightness: and as Thou didst give light to Moses when he went out of Egypt, so illuminate our hearts and senses, that we may deserve to arrive at light and life everlasting."
This is the night of which it is written: And the night shall be as light as the day; and the night is my light in my enjoyments." He beseeches the Father that the paschal candle, a symbol of Christ, "may continue to burn to dissipate the darkness of this night" of sin and death; so that the morning star which knows no setting -- "He who returning from the grave, serenely shone upon mankind" -- may find its flame alive. This same juxtaposition of light and darkness, life and death, is repeated in the prayer that follows the reading of the second prophecy:

O God, unchangeable power and light eternal: mercifully regard the wonderful mystery of Thy whole Church, and peacefully effect by Thy eternal decree the work of human salvation; and let the whole world experience and see that what was fallen is raised up, what was old is made new, and all things are re-established, through Him from whom they received their first being, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the collect of the Mass the relation between the light and Christ's resurrection is stated even more explicitly; for the Father is addressed as He who illumes the night "by the glory of the resurrection of our Lord."

Thompson, as soon as he has painted the picture of the sun set ...

... in august exposition meetly
Within the flaming monstrance of the West,

begins his praise of the sun which is in reality the praise of Christ. His first image recalls a figure that he uses in "Ode to the Setting Sun," when he describes the first day of creation and recalls how the sun, bursting forth from chaotic darkness, did

36 "O God, who makest this most sacred night illustrious by the glory of the resurrection of our Lord: preserve in the new children of the family the spirit of adoption which Thou hast given, that, renewed in body and soul, they may give Thee a pure service."

37 Lines 14-5.
Leap like a lion on the throat o' the dusk.\textsuperscript{38}

In "Orient Ode" he says:

Through breach'd darkness' rampart, a
Divine assaulter, art thou come!\textsuperscript{39}

The darkness to which Thompson refers is the spiritual night of sin, through whose rampart Christ, the divine assaulter, has come triumphantly. Thompson bids the sun abandon the moon and look upon earth, which is fairer and greater than the moon just as Mary is fairer and greater than "pale, ruined Eve." Mary, at God's first Ave, conceived and brought forth Christ; the earth, as the gazes of the sun fall upon her, conceives and brings forth the beauties of external nature. So the sun giving light and warmth and beauty to the earth, becomes the symbol of that "tremendous Lover" the light of whose countenance is the source of spiritual nourishment and loveliness.

\begin{quote}
The moon, O leave, pale, ruined Eve;
Behold her fair and greater daughter
Offers to thee her fruitful water,
Which at thy first white Ave shall conceive!
Thy gazes do on simple her
Desirable allures confer;
What happy comelinesses rise
Beneath thy beautifying eyes!
Who was, indeed, at first a maid
Such as, with sighs, misgives she is not fair,
And secret views herself afraid,
Till flatteries sweet provoke the charms they swear:
Yea, thy gazes, blissful Lover,
Make the beauties they discover!
What dainty guiles and treacheries caught
From artful prompting of love's artless thought
Her lowly loveliness teach her to adorn,
When thy plumes shiver against the conscious gates of morn!\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{38} Line 63.

\textsuperscript{39} Lines 18-9.

\textsuperscript{40} Lines 24-41.
In return for the sun's love and warmth, the earth gives back a dowry of beautiful, fragrant flowers, symbols of the loveliness and sweet odor of sanctity with which man repays Christ's love and warmth.

And so the love which is thy dower,
Earth, though her first-frightened breast
Against the exigent boon protest
(For she, poor maid, of her own power
Has nothing in herself, not even love,
But an unwitting void thereof),
Gives back to thee in sanctities of flower;
And holy odours do her bosom invest
That sweeter grows for being prest:41

"The earth in its rotation recoils from the sun's embrace until Phosphor leads her back from the West, a captive, laughing now once more in the sun's embrace."42 Similarly man, conscious of his sin, recoils from God's embrace until Christ, the Morning Star that knows no setting,43 leads him back a prisoner of divine Love and fills him with a joy and peace which only He can give.

Though dear recoil, the tremorous nurse of joy,
From thine embrace still startles coy,
Till Phosphor lead, at thy returning hour,
The laughing captive from the wishing West.44

The earth is not alone in proclaiming the sun's beneficent power. The planets are drawn toward the sun as their center, yet each wheels in its own orbit. Here is a symbol of the attraction and the recoil man has felt since the equilibrium of nature was disturbed by sin's entrance into

41 Lines 42-50.
42 Terence Connolly, S.J., op. cit., 454.
43 Vide supra, p. 22.
44 Lines 51-4.
the world. But Christ, the Lion of Juda, roars at man's heels, and man is "lashed with terror, leashed with longing" since Christ's hunt of the world began, but finally

... Life with Death
In obscure nuptials moveth,
Commingling alien yet affined breath.45

The relation between Christ and the sun becomes more explicit when Thompson addresses the sun as "incarnated Light," and as the "Giver of Love, and Beauty, and Desire."46 In this passage he clearly follows St. John, who begins his Gospel with the fundamental image of light when he speaks of the Word "that enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world." Again, the sun, like the lion slain by Samson,47 gives life and produces the sweetness of external nature. So Christ, though slain by man, gives life, "not only as Creator, the natural life, but as Redeemer, that 'incredible' super-life of grace by which men are made the sons of God, and participators in the divine life."48

Samson's riddling meanings merging
In thy twofold sceptre meet:
Out of thy minatory might,
Burning Lion, burning Lion,
Comes the honey of all sweet,
And out of thee, the Eater, comes forth meat.
And though, by thine alternate breath,
Every kiss thou dost inspire
Echoeth
Back from the windy vaultages of death;
Yet thy clear warranty above
Augurs the wings of death too must
Occult reverberations stir of love

45 Lines 75-7; cf. also lines 55-74.
46 Lines 78, 83.
Crescent, and life incredible;
That even the kisses of the just
Go down not unresurgent to the dust.49

The sun is the inspirer of poets; he teaches them to incarnate
truth in the disguise of earthly speech, just as God, Supreme Truth, is
incarnate in Christ.50 To Mary, the Moon in this symbolic universe,
Thompson ascribes his immediate inspiration, but ultimately that inspiration
has its source in Christ, the Sun:

Thou whisperest in the Moon's white ear,
And she does whisper into mine, --
By night together, I and she --
With her virgin voice divine,
The things I cannot half so sweetly tell
As she can sweetly speak, I sweetly hear.51

Both the earth and the moon, Woman, are dependent upon the sun, which is
but the image of Him to whom alone man bends the knee:

By her, the Woman, does Earth live, O Lord,
Yet she for Earth, and both in Thee.

Not unto thee, great Image, not to thee
Did the wise heathen bend an idle knee.52

Praise for the benefits of the sun follows: the ripening of the
grape and of the grain, the giving of health and warmth to man and to all
the earth. Christ, the Sun of Justice, gives to man His own blood to drink;
He is the life of all that live, yet He dwells in man's body as in a
tabernacle.53 The relation of the sun and the earth is similar to that of

49 Lines 86-101.
50 Vide supra, p. 11-2; cf. lines 105-11.
51 Lines 119-24.
52 Lines 125-6, 130-1.
53 Cf. lines 165-9.
Christ and His Church:

Thou to thy spousal universe
Art Husband, she thy Wife and Church.54

Finally, the sun in its rising and setting is the symbol of Christ's daily sacrifice of Himself in the Mass, the type of Him to whom the pinion of the poet's longing verse beats with fire which Christ Himself first gave.55

The poet has at last revealed the true meaning of the symbolism in his ode. He concludes with an "Amen" to the assertion of men who charge him with tracing on high heaven's face the saintly signs that have their place around the altar -- in other words, of seeing in nature an image of the truths of faith.

Ay, if men say that on all high heaven's face
The saintly signs I trace
Which round my stoléd altars hold their solemn place,
Amen, amen! For oh, how could it be, --
When I with wingéd feet had run
Through all the windy earth about,
Quested its secret of the sun,
And heard what thing the stars together shout, --
I should not heed thereout
Consenting counsel won: --
'By this, 0 Singer, know we if thou see.
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here,
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there,
Believe them: yea, and this -- then thou art seer,
When all thy crying clear
Is but: Lo here! lo there! -- ah me, lo everywhere!'56

Father Connolly's comment on the last five lines of the poem may well close this chapter on the Christocentric universe as portrayed in Thompson's poetry: "Here is the ecstacy of faith that does not see the veiled image of God beyond nature, but rather consumes visible nature in the intensity of its own heat and sees the apocalypse of God Himself."57

54 Lines 173-4. 55 Cf. lines 191-5.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE LITURGICAL SOURCES OF THOMPSON'S LANGUAGE

The Mass

Christocentric nature of thought in Thompson's poetry is but one aspect of his use of the liturgy. Still another aspect is worthy of consideration, one which is apparent even to the casual reader who has some knowledge: the relation between Thompson's language and that of the rites and ceremonies of the Church. Frequently this relation takes the form of metaphors and similes of liturgical origin; sometimes, though rarely, it is a literal translation from ecclesiastical Latin; again, it is the poetic condensation of some text that occurs in the services of the Church.

As all other liturgical functions derive their true meaning from their relation to and connection with the Mass, so the liturgical aspects of Thompson's language gravitate toward this center of the worship of the Church. Speaking of the Mass, Romano Guardini writes in The Spirit of the Liturgy:

It is a style in the stricter sense of the word as well -- clear in language, measured in movement, severe in its modelling of space materials, colors, and sounds; its ideas, languages, ceremonies, and imagery fashioned out of the simple elements of spirituel life; rich, varied, and lucid; its force further intensified by the fact that the liturgy employs a classic language, remote from everyday life. When all these considerations are borne in
mind it is easy to understand that the liturgy possesses a tremendously compelling form of expression which is a school of religious training and development to the Catholic who rightly understands it, and which is bound to appear to the impartial observer as a cultural formation of the most lofty kind.

If the poet approaches the altar and allows himself to become saturated with the language and thought of the Mass, his style gradually assimilates its spirit. As he takes part in the great social function, he is drawn out of himself. He shares the lot of the entire human family as it faces the supreme objective fact of its redemption.²

Thompson owes much of his poetical inspiration to the basic thoughts and actions of the Mass, and in some cases he has made use of the actual wording of the Mass. Leaders of the liturgical movement insist that the faithful must actively participate in the sacred mysteries and the public and solemn prayer of the Church. Thompson "lives" the Mass in his poetry. Ministers for the sacred function are not lacking, for Thompson knows how to dedicate everything to his purpose. In "Orient Ode" he points out

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
Day, a dedicated priest.³

And as if "Day" could not furnish sufficient members for the sanctuary, he provides a general priesthood in "A Corymbus for Autumn":

All Nature sacerdotal seems.⁴

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2 Ibid., 27.

3 Lines 1-2. Some of the passages that will be mentioned in this chapter have already been referred to in chapter three. Such repetition seems necessary, however, for in the last chapter these passages were treated for their underlying thought, whereas here they are considered from the point of view of language.

4 Line 80.
The priest dons special vestments in preparation for the sacrifice; Nature in her various manifestations suggests to Thompson many of these garments. The white clouds, scattered among the blue, remind him of the triangular amice of the priest, and he writes:

What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,...

Not only in Nature but in his own vocation as poet and in his Lady Muse he sees the stole, symbol of sacerdotal power. He confesses in "From a Night of Forebeing" that he is ever thinking of the snow-cloistered penance of the seed rather than of the snowdrop's saintly stoles:

The snowdrop's saintly stoles less heed
Than the snow-cloistered penance of the seed.

In "The Mistress of Vision" he beholds Mary surrounded by a stole of light, which encircles her body as an aureole:

With a sun-derived stole
Did in aureole
All her lovely body round.

He uses the word "stole" in this same sense of an aureole in "A Judgment in Heaven," when he writes:

The Poet bowed his brow majestic, * searching that patchwork through and through,
Feeling God's lucent gazes traverse * his singing-stoling and spirit too:

Then the Poet rent off robe and wreath, * so as a sloughing serpent doth,
Laid them at the Rhymer's feet, * shed down wreath and raiment both
Stood in a dim and shamèd stole, * like the tattered wing of a musty moth.

6 Lines 303-4.
7 Lines 33-5.
8 Lines 37-43.
In like manner, he declares in "Orient Ode":

\begin{quote}
Ay, if men say that on all high heaven's face
The saintly signs I trace
Which round my stolèd altars hold their solemn place,
Amen, amen! ... 
\end{quote}

Only in this last poem does Thompson use the word in its proper ritual sense, when he refers to the unvesting of the priest, Day, by twilight, "violet-cassocked acolyte." 10

In several passages Thompson refers to the cincture, the belt or girdle worn by the priest for confining the alb and making secure the stole. The hours are to him

\begin{quote}
... the linked cincture which girdles
Mortality's feverous breast. 11
\end{quote}

Again, writing of the human heart, he notes that

\begin{quote}
Its keys are at the cincture hung of God. 12
\end{quote}

Finally, in "A Judgment àn Heaven" he uses the word as a verb to give us the picture of saints encircling the poet with their wings and guiding him to the throne of God:

\begin{quote}
With plumes night-tinctured englobed and cinctured. 13
\end{quote}

Father Connolly gives a detailed explanation of Thompson's single use of the word "maniple" in the "Ode to the Setting Sun":

\begin{itemize}
  \item 9 Lines 196-9.
  \item 10 Cf. lines 10-2.
  \item 11 "The Song of the Hours," lines 64-5.
  \item 12 "A Fallen Yew," line 67.
  \item 13 Line 7.
\end{itemize}
It is the falling star that trails the light,
It is the breaking wave that hath the might,
The passing shower that rainbows maniple.14

Despite its length, the passage is worth quoting:

This line [10] is a manifestation of Thompson's power of observation exercised, it may be, among the hills of Sussex. When a rainbow is seen from an elevation that overlooks a great sweep of country, not infrequently a shower in the distance will seem to hang from it like a maniple from the arm of a priest. The real meaning of this line, however, is not to be found in external appearances but in its mystical significance interpreted in the spirit of the Church's liturgy. That spirit may best be gathered from the prayer said by the priest as he puts the maniple on his arm: "May I be worthy to bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow, that with exaltation I may receive the reward of labour." As one of the foremost authorities in such matters tells us: "The symbolic meaning of the maniple is probably based on the circumstance that originally it served the celebrant to wipe off tears and perspiration during the celebration of the Mass, but sprang principally from a passage in the Psalms, in which the word manipulus is mentioned in the sense of a sheaf of wheat: 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. Going they went and wept casting their seed; but coming they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their sheaves (manipulos suos).' Consequently, the maniple symbolizes, on the one hand, penitential tears and grief, the toil and hardships of sowing, the suffering and the combating, the work and labours of this perishable life; on the other, the fruit of good works and sheaves full of merit, as well as the abundant harvest of happiness and joy, of peace and rest reaped in eternity." (The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Rev. Nicholas Gihr, 285). From the context it is clear that Thompson uses the maniple as a symbol of the joys and harvest and the exultation of reward, rather than of the tears and sorrows of sowing. His meaning is, "rainbows, themselves symbols of hope, make of the passing shower a maniple, symbol of joy."15

Clad in his sacred vestments, the priest goes to the altar. The chalice which he carries is to Thompson at one time a symbol of his own

14 Lines 8-10.
15 Poems of Francis Thompson, 376.
fantasy:

Caught in my fantasy's crystal chalice; 16

at another time, of grief:

Let pass the chalice of this coming dread; 17

and at still another, of the banqueting of Nature's children at daybreak:

Quaffing, as your taintless way is,
From a chalice
Lucent-weeping out of the dayspring. 18

Above the chalice lies the pall, which is used after the Consecration to
cover the sacred Species of the wine. This idea Thompson conveys in "The
Making of Viola":

Weave, hands angelical,
Weave a woof of flesh to pall --
Weave, hands angelical --
Flesh to pall our Viola. 19

Father Connolly remarks that the expression here suggests the preciousness
and sacredness of the child. 20

Throughout the Mass, the priest makes use of the Psalms for the
Introit, Offertory, and Communion prayers, and in other parts of the
Eucharistic service, a verse here and a verse there, as in the Preface and
Sanctus. In like manner Thompson has strewn verses from the Psalms through­
out his poetry. The title of one poem, "Domus Tua," is an adaptation of the
Psalmist's words:

16 "An Anthem of Earth," line 42.
17 "Grief's Harmonics," line 16.
19 Lines 7-10.
I have loved, O Lord, the beauty of Thy house; and
the place where Thy glory dwelleth.21

"The Hound of Heaven" contains at least five adaptations from the Psalms.

The last few lines of the poem,

All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!22

are a paraphrase of part of Psalm LXXX:

And if his children forsake my law, and walk not in
my judgments: if they profane my justices and keep
not my commandments: I will visit their iniquities
with a rod: and their sins with stripes. But my mercy
I will not take away from him: nor will I suffer my
truth to fail.23

It is easy to grasp the significance of the last two lines of "The Singer
Saith of His Song":

And she sings the songs of Sion,
By the streams of Babylon.24

They are an adaptation of the lamentations of the Jewish people during the
Babylonian captivity:

Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept,
when we remembered Sion. On the willows in the midst
thereof we hung up our instruments. For there they
that led us into captivity required of us the words of
songs. And they that carried us away said: Sing ye
to us a hymn of the songs of Sion. How shall we sing
the song of the Lord in a strange land?25

21 Psalm XXV, 8.
22 Lines 171-6.
23 Psalm LXXX, 31-4.
24 Lines 11-2.
25 Psalm CXXXVI, 1-4.
The "Jubilate of the bird" of which Thompson speaks in "The Night of Forebeing"\textsuperscript{26} is a reference to the first word of Psalm XCIX:

\begin{quote}
Jubilate Deo omnis terra: servite Domino in laetitia.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

And when he writes in "Ad Castitatem":

\begin{quote}
For to the idols of the Gentiles I
Will never make me an hierophant: --
Their false-fair gods of gold and ivory,
Which have a mouth, nor any speech thereby,\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

the mind of the reader harks back to the Psalmist's words:

\begin{quote}
The idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the
works of men's hands. They have a mouth, but they
speak not: they have eyes, but they see not. They
have ears, but they hear not: neither is there any
breath in their mouths. Let them that make them be
like to them.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

The Epistle or Lesson which the priest reads in the first part of the Mass is frequently a passage from the letters of St. Paul. Extracts from these letters abound in Thompson's poems. In "The After Woman," a poem of but sixty-three lines, there are three. Thompson makes use of St. Paul's "fools for Christ's sake" and his constant reference to life as a warfare\textsuperscript{30} when he addresses the daughter of the new Eve:

\begin{quote}
Blest fool! Be ensign of our \textit{wars},
And shame us all to warriors!\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} Line 76.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Sing joyfully unto God, all the earth: serve ye the Lord with gladness.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Lines 69-70.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Psalm CXXXIV, 15-8.
\item \textsuperscript{30} For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty \textit{to} God unto the pulling down of fortifications, destroying counsels.--II Cor., x, 3-4.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Lines 14-5.
\end{itemize}
Where love is the motive of following Christ, who can be tardy? St. Paul writes to the Romans:

> Who then shall separate us from the love of Christ:
> Shall tribulations? or distress? or famine? or nakedness? or danger? or persecution? or the sword?
> ... But in all these things we overcome, because of him that loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor might, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Jesus Christ our Lord.32

Thompson compresses all this into two brief lines:

> Or who be tardy to His call
> In your accents augural?33

"Any Saint" is heavily laden with Pauline phraseology. Unless one turns to the scriptural references, the deeply religious significance of the poem is lost. The lines

> Stone of the Lawindeed,
> Thine own self couldst thou read34

become self-explanatory after one reads St. Paul's statement:

> The law of God is graven upon man's mind and heart, though he does not always heed what is written there.35

The struggle between the willing spirit and the weak flesh, between the eager resolve and its tardy execution, which all men know, Thompson compresses into the line

32 Romans, viii, 35-9.
33 "The After Woman," lines 40-1.
34 Lines 125-6.
35 Romans, ii, 15.
Slow foot and swift desire:36

The Pauline expression of this phase of human experience is:

The good which I will, I do not; but the evil which I will not, I do.37

St. Paul fully explains the paradox of the spiritual life when he writes to the Corinthians:

For though I should have a mind to glory, I shall not be foolish: for I will say the truth. But I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth in me, or anything he heareth from me. And lest the greatness of the revelations should exalt me, there was given me a sting of the flesh, an angel of Satan to buffet me. For which thing thrice I besought the Lord, that it might depart from me. And he said to me: My grace is sufficient for thee; for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly therefore will I glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may dwell in me ... For when I am weak, then am I powerful.38

Thompson expresses the same idea in the aphoristic fashion of a poet:

Most proud,
When utterly bowed,

To feel thyself and be
His dear nonentity --
Caught
Beyond human thought

In the thunder-spout of Him,
Until thy being dim.
And be
Dead deathlessly.

And St. Paul's triumphant cry,

I can do all things in Him who strengtheneth me.40

36 Line 130.
37 Romans, vii, 19.
38 II Corinthians, xii, 6-10.
39 Lines 155-64.
40 Philippians, iv, 5.
becomes in the words of Thompson:

Rise; for Heaven hath no frown
When thou to thee pluck'st down,
    Strong o'er!
The neck of God.41

Just before the priest reads the Gospel, he pauses before the tabernacle and prays:

Cleanse my heart and my lips, O Almighty God, who
didst cleanse the lips of the prophet Isaias with
a burning coal: and vouchsafe, through Thy gracious mercy, so to purify me, that I may worthily proclaim Thy holy Gospel. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

This prayer is derived from the words of Isaias, who describes a vision:

And one of the seraphim flew to me, and in his hand was a live coal, which he had taken with the tongs off the altar. And he touched my mouth: and said: Behold this hath touched thy lips and thy iniquities shall be taken away and thy sin shall be cleansed.42

A passage in "Orient Ode" is based on this narrative of Isaias. Following the spirit of the Mass, Thompson has turned it into a prayer, in which he speaks the needs of the poet:

Lo, my suit pleads
That thou, Isaias coal of fire,
Touch from yon altar my poor mouth's desire,
And the relucnt song take for thy sacred needs. 43

Thompson draws heavily on the Gospels. Because these passages are so numerous, one from each Evengelist will suffice. "The Kingdom of God" ends with a reference to St. Matthew's narrative of Christ upon the waters:

41 Lines 169-72.
42 Isaias, vi, 6-7.
43 Lines 152-5.
And in the fourth watch of the night, He came to them walking upon the sea.  

Thompson makes a local application of the story:

And lo, Christ walking on the water: Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

An analogous development of the text

Mary therefore took a pound of ointment of right spikenard, of great price, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the odor of the ointment.

is found in "Penelope":

Like to a box of spikenard did you break
Your heart about my feet.

The John referred to in "The Dread of Height" as one who

... ate daintier, and did tread
Less ways of heat

is John the Baptist, of whom St. Mark narrates:

And John was clothed with camel's hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and he ate locusts and wild honey.

"The House of Sorrows" contains a reference to Christ on the road to Calvary:

The Son of Weeping heard
		The Women's Pityer heard.

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44 Matt., xiv, 25.
45 Lines 23-4.
46 John, xii, 3.
47 Lines 7-8.
48 Lines 42-3.
49 Mark, i, 6.
50 Lines 36, 38.
The Gospel narrates the incident thus:

And there followed Him a great multitude of people, and of women, who bewailed and lamented Him. But Jesus turning to them said: "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over me but weep for yourselves, and for your children."\(^{51}\)

In the Gospel Christ has presented His credentials; in the Creed man responds with an act of absolute faith. Implicitly every poem of Thompson's is an act of faith, but in "Orient Ode" there is a literal translation of the "lumen de lumine" of the Nicene Creed in Thompson's "Light out of Light."\(^{52}\)

The priest now enters upon the first of the three principal parts of the Mass. The Offertory is an act of taking bread and wine and offering them to God. After offering the bread, the priest takes the chalice, goes to the epistle side of the altar, and pours into the cup some wine and a few drops of water. Meanwhile he prays:

\[O\text{ God, who in a wonderful manner didst create human nature, and ennobled it, and in a more marvelous manner hast renewed it, grant that by this mystical union of water and wine, we may be made sharers in His divinity who was made sharer in our humanity, Christ our Lord.}\]

The water and wine are mixed together and it is almost impossible to separate them. The union of the two is called "mystical" because it stands for something else. The water is a symbol of human nature, and the wine, of divine nature. Just as the wine and water are united in the chalice, so the divine and human natures are united in one person, the incarnate eternal Word; so, too, men are united to God by grace. Thompson suggests the two natures of Christ in "Assumpta Maria":

Risen 'twixt Anteros and Eros, Blood and Water, Moon and Sun. 53

"Blood" and "Sun" are symbols of Christ's divinity; "Water" and "Moon", of His Humanity. The union between God and man, the poet pictures in "Orient Ode":

Art thou not the life of them that live?  
Yea, in glad twinkling advent, thou dost dwell  
Within our body as a tabernacle! 54

At the Consecration the bread and wine which the priest has offered are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, the separate consecration of the two species constituting a mystical slaying of the Victim. This mystical death is the essence of the sacrifice, and this it is to which Thompson refers in "Orient Ode" when he writes:

Thou, for the life of all that live  
The victim daily born and sacrificed. 55

Thompson manifests his understanding of the supreme cost of this sacrifice in "Laus Amara Dolbris," his "bitter praise of pain." Addressing pain, he says:

... love's holy bread,  
Consecrated  
Not sacramental is, but through thy leaven. 56

With the "Amen" at the end of the doxology the priest concludes the Canon of the Mass, in which the Consecration, man's gift to God, is the main action. The sacrificial banquet, in which God becomes the food of

53 Lines 61-2.
54 Lines 167-8.
55 Lines 191-2.
56 Lines 107-9.
man, follows. The union indicated by the prayer for the pouring of the wine and water takes place in Holy Communion. Thompson has written a stanza in "My Lady the Tyranness" which well expresses this intimacy:

At last I said -- I have my God,
Who doth desire me, though a clod,
And from His liberal Heaven shall He
Bar in mine arms His privacy.
None shall deny
God to be mine, ...57

After Holy Communion the Mass quickly comes to a close. Before the people leave, however, the priest reads the first chapter of the Gospel of St. John to give a holy retrospect of the sublime action of love that has just taken place. This Gospel is a final message that aids the Christian to a better understanding of the life that is the "light of men." Thompson has borne this message in mind, for he has adapted whole passages from this beautiful Gospel in his poems. In "Motto and Invocation," which has already been referred to as giving the key to the spirit of Thompson's poetry, he abbreviates the passage

Omnia per ipsum facta sunt, et sine ipso factum
est nihil quod factum est,58

to a single line found below the title:

Omnia per ipsum, et sine ipso nihil.

He borrows the almost exact wording of verse five of St. John,

And the Light shineth in darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it,

for his poem "Grace of the Way":

57 Lines 57-63.

58 John, i, 3.
The light is in the darkness, and. 59
The darkness doth not comprehend. 59

The language of several passages in "Orient Ode" is based on this Gospel.

Thompson writes:

Thou art the incarnated Light
Whose Sire is aboriginal, and beyond
Death and resurgence of our day and night;
From him is thy vicegerent wand
With double potence of the black and white. 60

Father Connolly explains these lines in the following note:

In imagining the sun as the incarnation of light and
born of light "aboriginal," Thompson is manifestly
attributing to it an origin analogous to that of
Christ in the incarnation. (John, i.) The germ of
the idea is contained in the verses that distinguish
Christ from St. John the Baptist: "He was not the
light but was to give testimony of the light. That
was the true light which enlighteneth every man
that cometh into this world." (John, i, 8-9). 61

Thompson repeats the thought from the fourteenth verse of St. John's Gospel
in two other poems. In "Carmen Genesis" he says:

Into His worlds He came! 62

and in "Grace of the Way" he uses the familiar phrase:

The Word was flesh, ... 63

59 Lines 33-4.
60 Lines 78-82.
62 Line 51.
63 Line 41.
Minor Aspects of the Liturgy

The Mass occupies an unparalleled position in the liturgy. It is the Mass that gives its full efficacy to the spiritual treasury of the liturgical cycle; and it is by active participation in the Mass that the Christian receives divine energy to strengthen him on his journey through life, to enable him to remain with Christ on that journey. Finally, the Mass is the source of all the spiritual treasures that are bestowed through the other liturgical acts of the Church. It is the very center from which these lesser elements radiate. Next to the Mass the sacraments are the most intimate expression and enactment of the power which Christ entrusted to His Church. "The first rank among these liturgical actions, in relation to the Mass," writes Dom Virgil Michel, "is held by the sacraments. Strictly speaking, indeed, the sacraments include the Mass as their very sun and center, since the Eucharist is inseparably both sacrifice and sacrament, or sacrament-sacrifice as it has been happily called." 64 The sacraments are the indispensable means of living the life of Christ here on earth. Through them the Christian first becomes engrafted upon the Vine as a living branch; through them the branch receives an increase of strength and vigor and a daily flow of divine sap, without which it could not live.

Thompson, with his keen spiritual insight, saw "in all external things a 'sacrament', an external sign of inward grace, an external manifestation of the presence of God, with power to draw the poet nearer

64 The Liturgy of the Church, 211.
The words of Fulton Sheen clarify this use of the word "sacrament." In The Life of All Living, he explains:

The universe is a great sacrament. A sacrament in the strict sense of the term is a material sign used as a means of conferring grace, and instituted by Christ. In the broad sense of the term everything in the world is a sacrament inasmuch as it is a material thing used as a means of spiritual sanctification. Everything is and should be a stepping stone to God; sunsets should be the means of reminding us of God’s beauty as a snowflake should remind us of God’s purity. Flowers, birds, beasts, men, women, children, beauty, love, truth, all these earthly possessions are not an end in themselves, they are only means to an end. The temporal world is a nursery to the eternal world, and the mansions of this earth a figure of the Father’s heavenly mansions. The world is just a scaffolding up which souls climb to the kingdom of Heaven, and when the last soul shall have climbed through that scaffolding, then it shall be torn down and burnt with fervent fire, not because it is base, but simply because it has done its work.

Man therefore partly works out his salvation by sacramentalizing the universe; man sins by refusing to sacramentalize it, or, in other words, by using creatures as selfish ends rather than God-ward means. Manichaeism is wrong because it considers matter as an evil instead of a sacrament! Epicureanism is wrong because it considers pleasures a God, instead of a means to God. Sacramentalizing the universe ennobles the universe, for it bestows upon it a kind of transparency which permits the vision of the spiritual behind the material. Poets are masters in sacramentalizing creation for they never take anything in its mere material expression; for them things are symbols of the divine.

Thompson is one of these masters in sacramentalizing creation. He proves this in many poems. Everard Meynell has collected several statements from Thompson’s prose writings that show conscious striving for such a goal. "Arguments that go from heaven downwards," says Everard Meynell, "are

65 Terence Connolly, S.J., Poems of Francis Thompson, 425.
the commonplaces of his poetry; that he was ready to prove the sum of his wisdom from earth upwards is told in a passage of his prose:

If the Trinity were not revealed, I should nevertheless be induced to suspect the existence of such a master-key by the trinities through which expounds itself the spirit of man. Such a trinity is the trinity of beauty — Poetry, Art, Music. Although its office is to create beauty I call it the trinity of beauty, because it is the property of earthly as of heavenly beauty to create everything to its own image and likeness.... Absolutely are these three the distinct manifestation of a single essence. 67

And in another place Thompson writes:

Absolute Nature lives not in our life, nor yet is lifeless, but lives in the life of God and in so far and so far merely, as man himself lives in that life, does he come into sympathy with Nature, and Nature with him. She is God's daughter who stretches her hand only to her Father's friends. Not Shelley, not Wordsworth himself, ever drew so close to the heart of Nature as did the Seraph of Assisi, who was close to the Heart of God. 68

Thompson presents this thought in verse form in these unpublished lines from his notebooks:

Dost thou perceive no God within the frog?  
0 poor, poor Soul!  
Bristles and rankness only in the hog?  
0 wretched dole!  
No wry'd beneficence in the fever's germ?  
Nor any Heaven shut within the worm?  
Dost shudder daintily  
At words, in song, shaped so un-lovelily?  
To school, to school!


For does it to thee seem
That God in an ill dream
Fashioned the twisted horrors of the standing pool? 69

His sense of possession and privacy in possession of the beauties of Nature finds voice in "Carmen Genesis":

... I start,
Thy secrets lie so bare!

With beautiful importunacy
All things plead, 'We are fair!' To me
Thy world's a morning haunt,
A bride whose zone no man hath slipt
But I, with baptism still bedript
Of the prime water's font. 70

Besides thus sacramentalizing Nature in general, Thompson makes several specific references to particular sacraments. The phrase "prime water's font" in the lines just quoted from "Carmen Genesis" refers to the sacrament of baptism. There is a similar passage in the "Ode to the Setting Sun":

What wild divinity makes my heart thus
A fount of most baptismal tears? 71

Here "baptismal tears" conveys the idea of purifying; hence they are tears that purify the soul, or tears that spring from blameless sorrow. Baptism was instituted for the cleansing of the soul from original sin. Thompson presents the story of the bitter effects of the first sin of man and of the consequent necessity of baptism in "Laus Amara Doloris":

Yea, that same awful angel with the glaive
Which in disparadising orbit swept
Lintel and pilaster and architrave
Of Eden-gates, and forth before it drave

69 Ibid., 208.
70 Lines 95-102.
71 Lines 23-4.
The primal pair, then first whose startled eyes,
With pristine drops o' the no less startled skies
Their own commingling, wept; --
With strange affright
Sin knew the bitter first baptismal rite.72

He makes use of the ceremony for the administering of the sacrament in
the fascinating poem "The Making of Viola." During the ceremony of baptism
the priest breathes on the face of the child and says:

Depart from her, unclean spirit, and make place
for the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit.

In Thompson's poem the heavenly Father commands the Holy Spirit:

Breathe, Lord Paraclete,
To a bubbled crystal meet --
Breathe, Lord Paraclete --
Crystal soul for Viola.

And the angels take up the cry:

Breathe, Regal Spirit, a73
Flashing soul for Viola.

As with the sacrament of baptism, so with the sacrament of con-
firmation: Thompson mentions in several scattered lines words peculiar to
the sacrament and then presents a picture connected with its institution
or administration. Chrism, the holy oil used for confirmation, he mentions
in "Laus Amara Doloris":

And mutinous principate of man's restless mind
With thine anointing oils the singer is designed:
To that most desolate station
Thine is his deep and dolorous consecration,74
Oh, where thy chrism shall dry upon my brow.

72 Lines 115-23.
73 Lines 25-30.
74 Lines 77-81.
In the same poem he draws the picture of the descent of the Holy Ghost on the first Pentecost:

Yea, on the brow of mother and of wife
Descends thy confirmation from above
A Pentecostal flame.75

It is more difficult to find references to the other sacraments in Thompson's poems, but a careful search will not go unrewarded. In "Field Flower" Thompson uses the word "chrism" again, this time reminding the Christian of the anointing of the senses in the sacrament of extreme unction:

That chrism he laid upon his eyes,
And lips, and heart, for euphrasies,
That he might see, feel, sing, perdis
The simple things that are the wise.76

Thompson's source for the third stanza of "Ad Castitatem" is undoubtedly the sacrament of penance:

And with confession never done
Admit the sacerdotal sun,
Absolved eternally
By his appercing eye.77

In "From the Night of Forebeing" he refers indirectly to the sacrament of matrimony when he writes:

Self-bonded God doth wait
Thrice-promulgated bans
Of His fair nuptial-date.78

He sees in the three days Christ's body remained in the tomb an analogy to

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75 Lines 105-7.
76 Lines 25-9.
77 Lines 9-12.
78 Lines 309-11.
the three public announcements of the intentions of persons to marry.

The sacrifice of the Mass and the sacraments produce sanctifying effects in the soul in proportion to the good dispositions of that soul. The Church, in true motherly fashion, gives her children a means to enable them to secure proper dispositions, namely, the sacramentals.

The sacramentals are then for us a means pointed out by the Church and instituted by her, through which the members of Christ can live the Christian life more also in the detailed circumstances and situations of life under the special guidance of the Church. They are so many ways of living in more faithful union with the mystical body and of developing ever more perfectly the complete mind of Christ in men.

Under sacramentals we may include everything connected with the liturgy of the Church, therefore everything found in the official liturgical books, missal, breviary, ritual, pontificals, etc., that is not essential to the sacrifice and the sacraments.

That Francis Thompson was fully aware of this treasure house of graces is easily seen from his constant application of sacramental terms to the ordinary things in life or in nature. He refers to Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament more frequently than to any other sacramental. His fondness for the word "censer" is not surprising, for the likening of prayer to incense in a censer is common in Holy Scripture. In "The Sere of the Leaf" he pictures the nature of his own vocation as a poet. To him the heart is a censer within which is the glowing coal of love. "This censer," says Father Connolly, "suspended upon the 'quivering chain' of man's 'heart-strings', is swayed by the soul's unrest, while the fire within it is fed with 'precious pain' and from it chants of God's praise rise up as the smoke of incense."

79 Virgil Michel, O.S.B., op. cit., 254.

The heart, a censered fire whence fuming chants aspire,
Is fed with oozed gums of precious pain;
And unrest spins denser, denser, the fragrance from that censer,
With the heart-strings for its quivering chain. 81

In the "Song of the Hours" the sun is the censer swinging about him "the blossom-sweet earth," 82 while in "Sister Songs" the same censer, the sun, sends up clouds of incense at the close of day:

The day is lingered out:
In slow wreaths folden
Around yon censer, spheréd, golden,
Vague Vesper's fumes aspire;
And, glimmering to eclipse,
Its honey of wild flame, its jocund spilth of fire. 83

The sun in stanza seven of "The Mistress of Vision" is the incarnate Son of God. The glory of His light is a silver censer, wafting clouds of incense to the heavenly Father. 84 Thompson words it thus:

The sun which lit that garden wholly,
Low and vibrant visible;
Tempered glory woke;
And it seemed solely
Like a silver thurible
Solemnly swung, slowly,
Fuming clouds of golden fire, for a cloud of incense-smoke. 85

In "A Corymbus for Autumn," however, there is a "supreme passage that opens the door to a new Catholic interpretation of Nature." 86 Nature is the priest summoned to chant Vespers by the tones of the golden gong of an

81 Lines 111-4.
82 Lines 49-50:
... while the sun with his hid chain swings
Like a censer around him the blossom-sweet earth.
83 Lines 739-45.
84 Terence Connolly, S.J., op. cit., 435.
85 Lines 37-43.
86 Edmund G. Gardner, "The Poetry of Mr. Francis Thompson," Month, XCI (1898), 137.
autumnal sunset. Night, a cowled monk, kneels upon the sanctuary stairs, and over all the earth is the "feel of incense everywhere." Father Connolly says: "It may be that some holy spirit swings the earth as a censer, incense-laden, before the Throne of God, or it may be that we are thus made sensibly aware of Autumn herself, hidden

... under all these shrouds
Of light, and sense and silence.

But even this 'primal liturgy' of an autumnal sunset is the passing beauty of earth that within an hour must lie as if in death:

Beneath the dreadful catafalque of the dark,

87 while Heaven lights the candles of its stars around the still, dark corpse."

Or higher, holier, saintlier when, as now,
All Nature sacerdotal seems, and thou.
The calm hour strikes on yon golden gong,
In tones of floating and mellow light
A spreading summons to even-song:
See how there
The cowléd Night
Kneels on the Eastern sanctuary-stair.
What is this feel of incense everywhere?
Clings it round folds of the blanch-amiced clouds,
Upwafted by the solemn thrifer,
The mighty Spirit unknown,
That swingeth the slow earth before the embannered Throne?
Or is't the Season under all these shrouds
Of light, and sense, and silence, makes her known
A presence everywhere,
An inarticulate prayer,
A hand on the soothed tresses of the air?
But there is one hour scant
Of this Titanian, primal liturgy;
As there is but one hour for me and thee,
Autumn, for thee and thine hierophant,
Of this grave-ending chant.
Round the earth still and stark
Heaven's death-lights kindle, yellow spark by spark,
Beneath the dreadful catafalque of the dark. 88

88 Lines 79-104.
But the most sublime of these Benediction scenes bursts upon the vision in "Orient Ode." It is in the opening lines of this poem that "Thompson shows himself the supreme poet of Catholic liturgy." The sun is no longer the censer, nor is it merely a resplendent light; it is the Blessed Sacrament Itself. For the Benediction service in the Catholic Church, the priest does not don the vestments used at Holy Mass, but he wears a surplice, stole, and cope. Accompanied by acolytes, he enters the sanctuary, kneels for a moment in adoration, and then ascends the altar steps, opens the tabernacle door, places the Sacred Host in the golden monstrance, and sets it on the altar for the veneration of the faithful.

In Thompson's poem the East is the sanctuary and tabernacle whence Day, the priest, lifts the sun to scatter blessings as it proceeds across the sky; as the procession comes to a close, Day, attended by his acolyte, Twilight, sets the sun in the monstrance of the West, and gives the solemn Benediction. To make the ceremony complete, Thompson even uses the first two lines of the hymn that is usually sung at Benediction, a part of St. Thomas's "Verbum Supernum." But only Thompson's words portray the scene adequately:

Lo, in the sanctuaried East,
Day, a dedicated priest
In all his robes pontifical exprest,
Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly,
From out its Orient tabernacle drawn,
Yon orbèd sacrament confest
Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;
And when the grave procession's ceased,
The earth with due illustrious rite
Blessed, -- ere the frail fingers fealty
Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,
His sacerdotal stoles unvest --
Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,
The sun in august exposition meetly
Within the flaming monstrance of the West.

89 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 118.
O salutaris hostia,
Quae coeli pandis ostium;\(^90\)

"Orient Ode" contains several other references to sacramentals. Thompson himself confesses that the poem was suggested by certain passages in the liturgy of Holy Saturday.\(^91\) The phrase "fruitful water"\(^92\) refers to the blessing of the baptismal font on Holy Saturday. During this blessing the priest prays that God

\[\ldots\text{ may render this water fruitful for the regeneration of men, to the end that a heavenly offspring, conceived by sanctification, may emerge from the immaculate womb of the divine font, reborn new creatures: and that all, however distinguished by sex in body, or age in time, may be brought forth to the same infancy by grace, their spiritual mother.}\]

The meaning of the lines

Till Phosphor lead, at thy returning hour, \(^93\)
The laughing captive from the wishing West,

becomes evident when one reads the prayer said during the lighting of the lamps:

May the morning star find its flame alight; that morning star, I mean, which knows no setting; that star which, rising again from the grave, serenely shone upon mankind.

"Phosphor" is but a poetic name for the planet Venus, which is seen as the morning star. Father Connolly thinks the lines

\[^{90}\text{Lines 1-17.}\]
\[^{91}\text{Everard Meynell, op. cit., 143.}\]
\[^{92}\text{Line 26.}\]
\[^{93}\text{Lines 53-4.}\]
The terror, and the loveliness, and purging,
The deathfulness and lifefulness of fire, may have been suggested by two complementary ceremonies of Holy Week: the extinguishing of the lamps on Holy Thursday and the lighting and blessing of the new fire on Holy Saturday. The phrase "Light out of Light," although a literal translation of "lumen de lumine" in the Nicene Creed, also recalls the frequent references to Christ as Light in the liturgy of Holy Saturday. The most outstanding of these is the "Lumen Christi" -- "Light of Christ" -- sung three times by the deacon before the blessing of the paschal candle.

It is an unfortunate fact that the majority of Catholics do not familiarize themselves with the solemn service of Benediction, and that a still smaller number attend the Holy Week services. To this lack of familiarity with the liturgical functions, the so-called "obscurity" of Francis Thompson may in large measure be traced. There is one sacramental, however, that is widely used by all Catholics: the sign of the cross. The most casual reader cannot fail to note Thompson's frequent references to this standard of our faith. Perhaps the most striking of these passages is the after-strain of "Ode to the Setting Sun," which is dedicated in a special manner to the cross. Thompson sees the cross between him and the bright sky of poetic achievement, and he accepts it in the spirit of Christian resignation:

94 Lines 84-5.
96 Line 127.
97 Terence Connolly, op. cit., 381.
Now with wan ray that other sun of Song
Sets in the bleakening waters of my soul;
One step, and lo! the Cross stands gaunt and long
'Twixt me and yet bright skies, a presaged dole.

Even so, O Cross! thine is the victory.
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields:
Brightness may emanate in Heaven from thee,
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields.

Of reaped joys thou art the heavy sheaf
Which must be lifted, though the reaper groan;
Yea, we may cry till Heaven's great ear be deaf,
But we must bear thee, and must bear alone.

Therefore, O tender Lady, Queen Mary,
Thou gentleness that dost enmoss and drape
The Cross's rigorous austerity,
Wipe thou the blood from wounds that needs must gape.

'Lo, though suns rise and set, but crosses stay,
I leave thee ever,' saith she, 'light of cheer.'

If a large number of Catholics are unfamiliar with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and the services of Holy Week, a still greater number scarcely know of the existence of the divine office. The term "divine office" means in general a duty or a function to be performed for God. In particular, it is used to designate the circle of daily prayers which the Church officially offers up to God through her ministers. The daily recitation of the office rests upon the principle of the duty of the creature to give praise to his Creator.

From childhood on we have been familiar with the idea of seeing the greatness of God in nature. As a reaction to a materialistic bias, scientists themselves are now in greater numbers protesting that their wonderful discoveries have filled them with awe at the marvels of creation and its Creator. It was left to rational man, the acme of mundane creation, to disrupt

98 Lines 1-12, 17-22.
the harmony of the canticle sung to God by nature. Through the fall in Paradise a discordant note was introduced into the eternal music of the spheres. ... Christ, in His redemption, restored man to the position which man could not of himself regain. Once restored, man was again capable of playing his part most abundantly in the concert of creation in a manner acceptable to God.

Because Christ, in reorganizing the divine symphony of nature and the supernatural, instituted a Church endowed with His divine powers and promised to remain with her to the end of days, man is now capable of a much higher type of divine service and praise than before. Through the Church and the liturgy he can now sing his song of praise to God with all the efficacy of divine Life itself.... In the divine office, then, the Church speaks to God and Christ with her; the Church speaks to Christ, and Christ speaks to the Church. It is an intimate sharing the very life of God and a further realization of that divine intercourse established first of all through the incarnation and wrought by God into a real and continued human participation in the Divine, ... 99

Writing on the necessity of the laity's reading the breviary if they would enter whole-souled into the spirit of the liturgy, Thompson says:

Now many, outside the ranks of ecclesiastics, ever open the breviary with the scriptural allocations over which has presided a wonderful symbolic insight, illuminating them by passages from the Fathers and significant prayers? The offices of the Church are suggested poetry -- that of the Assumption, for instance, the Little Office, and almost all those of our Lady. 100

He was twenty years ahead of his time in this impassioned plea for an intelligent liturgical movement among the laity, but he himself realized the efficacy of this prayer of the Church, and through his poetry he shared with

99 Virgil Michel, O.S.B., op. cit., 279-82.

all mankind the beauty and wisdom he sucked in at the breast of his spiritual Mother. Nowhere, perhaps, is the relation between his language and that of the liturgy of the Church, and specifically of the divine office, more evident than in "Assumpta Maria," which, he himself confessed, was "vamped up from the office of Our Lady." He mentions his sources in detail:

They are almost entirely taken from the Office of the Assumption, some from the Canticle, a few images are from mythology. Some very beautiful images are from a hymn by St. Nerses the Armenian, rendered in 'Carmina Mariana.'

For some of his images Thompson is also indebted, though perhaps less consciously, to other parts of the divine office and to the Litany of Loretto, one of the five official litanies of the Church. A detailed analysis of the poem in the light of its liturgical sources will, therefore, not be out of place.

The title, "Assumpta Maria," is an abbreviation of the antiphon which the Church uses again and again during the octave of the Assumption:

Assumpta est Maria in coelum: gaudent angeli, laudantes benedicunt Dominum.

Mary was taken into heaven; the angels rejoice and, with praises, bless the Lord.

This is the mystery of the feast of the Assumption, and this is the subject of Thompson's hymn of praise.

Filled with awe and wonder at this august mystery, the Church

101 Everard Meynell, op. cit., 173.
102 Ibid., 173.
cries out:

Who is she that ascendeth as the morning rising,
    fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as
an army set in battle array? 103

Thompson puts this question into Mary's own mouth and then allows her to answer it:

'Mortals, that behold a Woman
Rising 'twixt the Moon and Sun;
Who am I the heavens assume? an
All am I, and I am one. 104

These lines form, as it were, the motif of the poem. Like a musician on a theme, Thompson plays on this idea, introducing variations now and again. Before Mary reveals her identity, she describes her ascent in the words of the antiphon:

Multitudinous ascend I,
Dreadful as a battle arrayed, 105

and she explains what kind of multitude accompanies her:

For I bear you whither tend I:
Ye are I: be undismayed. 106

In the lines that follow, Mary makes use of symbols to tell mankind who she is whom the King has thus honored. The present study is concerned only with those images that can be traced to a liturgical source. Mary declares:

I, the Ark that for the graven
    Tables of the Law was made;
Man's own heart was one; one, Heaven:
    Both within my womb were laid. 107

103 Antiphon at the "Benedictus," feast of the Assumption.
104 Lines 1-4.
105 Lines 5-6.
106 Lines 7-8.
107 Lines 9-12.
And the reader's mind immediately harks back to the invocation of the Litany of Loretto "Ark of the Covenant." An examination of the office, however, discloses the source of this passage in the fourth lesson for the feast of the Assumption. Here, in the words of St. John Damascene, the Church declares:

Today, the holy and animated Ark of the living God, who bore in her womb her own Maker, rests in the temple of the Lord.

But Thompson expands the thought and draws on the liturgy of Holy Week to round it out. For the Christ that rested in Mary's womb is both Anteros and Eros, divine love and human; He is the Strong, the Holy, the Immortal One of whom the Church begs mercy during the adoration of the Cross on Good Friday. Hence Thompson places the following lines into Mary's mouth:

For there Anteros and Eros, Heaven with man, conjoined was, --
Twin-stone of the Law, Ischyros,
Agios Athanatos.\textsuperscript{108}

Two passages in the office emphasize the twofold nature of Christ and His abiding in Mary's womb. On the Sunday within the octave of the Assumption, the Church cries:

Rejoice, O Joachim, because from thy daughter a Son is born to us:... This child is God;\textsuperscript{109}

and on the octave day she says by the mouth of St. Bernard:

For what angelic purity can be compared to that virginity which was worthy to become the sanctuary of the Holy Ghost and the dwelling place of the Son of God?\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{108} Lines 13-6.

\textsuperscript{109} Lesson 6: sermon of St. John Damascene.

\textsuperscript{110} Lesson 5.
A little later Mary declares that she is

... the boundless strict Savannah
Which God's leaping feet go through. 111

The lines suggest the vast expanse of the firmament and recall another invocation of the Litany of Loretto, "Gate of heaven," as well as a line from the hymn for Lauds on the feast of the Assumption, "Tu Regis alti janua," which Canon Mulcahy translates: "Portal, through which the King has passed." 112 Again, Mary avers that she is

... the four Rivers! Fountain,
Watering Paradise of old; 113

and on the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes the Church says:

The Lord God planted a paradise of pleasure,
and he brought forth the tree of life in the midst of it. And a river went out of the place of pleasure. 114

The meaning of Thompson's lines becomes clear after a reading of the verses in Genesis from which this versicle is taken. The inspired writer says:

And a river went out of the place of pleasure
to water paradise, which from thence is divided into four heads. 115

It is evident that the figure in the following line,

Cloud down-raining the Just One am, 116

111 Lines 21-2.
112 Hymns of the Roman Breviary and Missal, 107.
113 Lines 31-2.
114 Versicle after Lesson 8.
115 Genesis, ii, 10.
116 Line 33.
is drawn from the versicle sung after the hymn "Creator alme" during Vespers in Advent:

Drop down dew, ye heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain the just:...

Again Thompson borrows an image from the "O gloriosa Virginum," which the Church sings at Lauds on the feast of the Assumption. He expands a single line of the hymn into four lines, so that whereas the Church sings of Mary:

Et aula lucis fulgida

Bright palace, graced with light of heaven, 117

Mary herself in Thompson's poem says:

I, the Presence-hall where Angels
Do emwheel their plac'd King --
Even my thoughts which, without change else,
Cyclic burn and cyclic sing. 118

The last symbol which Mary uses to identify herself has its parallel in a passage from the fourth lesson of the feast of the Assumption. Here St. John Damascene states:

Today the Eden of the new Adam receives a living paradise, in which the condemnation is annulled, the tree of life is planted, and our nakedness is covered.

In the words of Thompson, Mary says:

To the hollow of Heaven transplanted,
I a breathing Eden spring,
Where with venom all outpanted
Lies the slimed Curse shrivelling. 119

117 Canon Mulcahy, op. cit., 107.
118 Lines 41-4.
119 Lines 45-8.
Mary concludes her answer to the question "Who am I the heavens assume?" with the following lines:

'Then commanded and spake to me
He who framed all things that be;
And my Maker entered through me,
In my tent His rest took He.
Lo! He standeth, Spouse and Brother,
I to Him, and He to me,
Who upraised me where my mother
Fell, beneath the apple-tree.
Risen, 'twixt Anteros and Eros,
Blood and Water, Moon and Sun,
He upbears me, He Ischyros,
I bear Him, the Athanatos! 120

On the feast of the Assumption the Church applies to our Lady the following words from Ecclesiasticus:

Then the Creator of all things commanded, and said to me: and he that made me, tested in my tabernacle. 121

Thompson merely translates this prose into poetry. "Spouse and Brother" may be regarded as an echo of the King's "my sister, my spouse," which occurs several times in the lessons during the octave of the Assumption. 122 Similarly, "I to Him, and He to me" is but a paraphrase of "I to my beloved, and my beloved to me." 123 The last two of these eight lines emphasize the contrast between the first Eve and Mary, the Eve of the New Law. They are drawn from the first lesson of the octave of the Assumption:

Under the apple tree I raised thee up; there thy mother was corrupted, there she was defloured that bore thee.

120 Lines 53-64.
121 Chapter of the first Vespers; cf. Ecclesiasticus, xxiv, 12.
122 Cf. Lesson 2, first nocturne, fourth day within the octave.
123 Cf. Lesson 2, first nocturne, fifth day within the octave.
Thompson himself speaks in the last stanzas of "Assumpta Maria."
The awe and wonder that are characteristic of the Church's praise of Mary
in the mystery of her Assumption have become part of the poet's own being.
On the feast itself the Church gives voice to her admiration in the words
of the Canticle of Canticles:

\[
\text{Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun,}
\text{terrible as an army set in battle array?}^{124}
\]

On the octave she uses a variant of this passage:

\[
\text{Who is this that cometh up from the desert,}
\text{flowing with delight, leaning upon her beloved?}^{125}
\]

Thompson expresses the same idea in still another form, and adds a thought
that seems to have been drawn from the office of the Epiphany: 

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Who is She, in candid vesture,} \\
\text{Rushing up from out the brine?} \\
\text{Treading with resilient gesture} \\
\text{Air, and with that Cup divine?} \\
\text{She in us and we in her are} \\
\text{Beating Godward: all that pine,} \\
\text{Lo, a wonder and a terror --} \\
\text{The Sun hath blushed the Sea to Wine.}^{127}
\end{align*}
\]

The image of Mary as the "Presence-hall" of the King seems to be uppermost
in his mind; therefore he paraphrases the words of the office,

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Lift up your gates, O ye princes, and be ye} \\
\text{lifted up, O eternal gates: and the King of} \\
\text{glory shall enter in,}^{128}
\end{align*}
\]

and he cries to Mary:

\[
\begin{align*}
124 \text{ Antiphon at the "Benedictus."} \\
125 \text{ Cf. Lesson 1.} \\
126 \text{ Hymn of the first Vespers: Aquae rubescunt hydriae -- The waters blush} \\
\text{within the jar. (Canon Mulcahy's translation)} \\
127 \text{ Lines 76-84.} \\
128 \text{ Psalm xxiii, 7 and 9 -- third psalm of the first nocturne of the} \\
\text{Assumption.}
\end{align*}
\]
Open wide thy gates, O Virgin,  
That the King may enter Thee!  
At all gates the clangours gurge in,  
God's paludament lightens, see!  
Camp of Angels! Well we even  
Of this thing may doubtful be, --  
If thou art assumed to Heaven,  
Or is Heaven assumed to thee?129

Memories of the Church's prayer mingle with the echo that  
Cadent fails the stars along! --  
Mortals, that behold a Woman  
Rising 'twixt the Moon and Sun;  
Who am I the heavens assume? an  
All am I, and I am one.130

129 Lines 89-96.
130 Lines 101-5.
CHAPTER FIVE

AN ESTIMATE OF THOMPSON AS POET OF MODERN CATHOLICITY

The style of a great writer, says Cardinal Newman, "is the lucid mirror of his mind and life."¹ Only in so far as it is the image of his true self is the style of an author sincere; and only in so far as it is sincere can it be great. The test of Thompson's style as the poet of modern Catholicity, therefore, will be its fidelity to his innermost thoughts and feelings. In his notebooks, which were never intended for publication, Thompson has left an intimate record of his ideals and strivings as a poet. Through them one comes upon him unawares, and participates in experiences that would otherwise have remained the secret of the man. In proportion, then, as Thompson's poetry is the concrete embodiment of the ideas contained in his notebooks, it may be regarded as a faithful image of his mind.

So far as Thompson's use of liturgical sources is concerned, one passage in the notebooks is of particular interest. Of the function of poetry he writes:

Job, Isaiah, Ezekiel, all the prophets with amazing Apocalypse at their head, are but that Imagination (God's) stooping to the tongue of the nursling. Yet

the Apocalypse is so big with meanings that every sentence yields significances of endless study. And it is just the child's apologue of that inconceivably enormous Mind, whose mature book is the Universe, and its compendium Man. He cannot read himself -- that compendium is beyond him -- he is too big for himself; so that he takes up, as an easier labour, the reading of God, and is seriously angry with his Author's obscurity! Yet, in one germ-idea of that mind a wilderness of Pleatos would be more unnoticeably lost than flies inside St. Paul's. But, secondly, there is an added reason for human confusion, which is nearly always ignored. The world -- the Universe -- is a fallen world. When people try to understand the Divine plans, they forget that everything is not as it was designed to be. And with regard to any given thing you have first to discover, if you can, how far it is as it was meant to be. That should be precisely the function of poetry -- to see and to restore the Divine idea of things, freed from the disfiguring accidents of their Fall.

The last sentence bears a striking similarity to the central purpose of the liturgical apostolate: "Instaurare omnia in Christo, -- to re-establish all things in Christ." Moreover, it implies the thought which Thompson expressed in a line from Cowley:

Thou needst not make new songs, but say the old.

He intended this line as a kind of motto for "Assumpta Maria"; but it may well be applied to all of his poetry that is based on the liturgy. For


3 Gerald Ellard, S.J., "A Papal Motto and Its Meaning," Orate Fratres, I (1926-1927), 141. In this article Father Ellard traces the motto of the liturgical movement to its source, the encyclical E supremi apostolatus cathedra of Pius X, in which the Pontiff wrote: "Nevertheless, since it has pleased Divine Providence to lift our lowliness to this plentitude of power, we raise up our mind in Him who strengthens us, and as, borne up by God's might, we set our hand to the work, we proclaim that in bearing the Pontifical office it is our one purpose to 're-establish all things in Christ' (Ephes. 1, 10) so that Christ may be 'all in all' (Col. 3, 11)."


Thompson realized that the Catholic Church is the visible repository of the Beauty ever ancient, ever new, and so he turned to her for inspiration. Other poets sought and found inspiration in the dogmas and the philosophy of the Church. Thompson directed his attention to her ritual, the external symbol of her philosophy and doctrine; in it he discovered a treasure that had been neglected since the days of the Reformation and was completely unknown to Victorian England. Like the merchant of the Gospel, Thompson, once he had become aware of this treasure, bartered all he had for the pearl of great price, and in return received not only a new poetic vision but also the reward that is ever the portion of those who love not the things of the world: the praise of a few, the censure of the many. They complained, as they still complain, that he is obscure, but they failed to realize the nature of that obscurity.

Obscurity may be considered from two points of view: that of the writer and that of the reader. The poet alone, says Coventry Patmore, may and can speak the otherwise unutterable Truth in such a way "that the disc with its withering heat and blinding brilliance remains wholly invisible, while enough warmth and light are allowed to pass through the clouds of his speech to diffuse daylight and genial warmth." Thompson has expressed a similar idea in "Carmen Genesis":

Poet! still, still thou dost rehearse,  
In the great fiat of thy Verse,  
Creation\'s primal plot;  
And what thy Maker in the whole  
Worked, little maker, in thy soul  
Thou work\'st, and men know not.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} "Aurea Dicta, CVII," The Rod, the Root, and the Flower, 33.  
\textsuperscript{5} Lines 55-60.
In "Sister Songs," moreover, he confesses to Monica that at times he himself, like the inspired writers of old, knows not the meaning of the words he utters:

And ah, we poets, I misdoubt,
Are little more than thou!
We speak a lesson taught we know not how,
And what it is that from us flows
The hearer better than the utterer knows. 6

This is Thompson's attitude toward his poetry in general. Concerning the distinctly Catholic note of his poetry, he clarifies his position still further when he says:

The personal embrace between Creator and creature is so solely the secret and note of Catholicism, that its language to the outer sects is unintelligible -- the strange fruit of inapprehensible myth. 7

This passage gives a clue to the nature of Thompson's obscurity from the reader's point of view. Because the reader is not familiar with the liturgy of the Church, he fails to grasp the meaning of poetry inspired by it. As Everard Meynell puts it:

Of the poet who is religious it may be said: 'There hath drawn near a man to a deep heart, that is, a secret heart.' Look not at a star if you wish to see it: avert your gaze and it is clearer to you. So with the rockets and flashes of revelation. It must be remembered that the greater part of Francis Thompson's seeming reservations are only such as exist between the Church and the outer world. 8

It remains, then, to evaluate Thompson's achievement as the poet

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6 Lines 55-60.
7 Part II, lines 376-80.
8 Life of Francis Thompson, 224.
of modern Catholicity, the poet of the liturgy. His poetic procedure in his use of the liturgy is not always the same. In both the "Ode to the Setting Sun" and "Orient Ode", a natural phenomenon -- specifically, a glorious sunset -- suggests a truth of faith: in the first poem, the transforming power of the Cross of Christ; in the second, the splendor of Christ's victory over the darkness of sin. This barely suggested image seems to fade away as the poet, in a strange combination of mythological, scriptural, and liturgical language, sings the purely natural glories of the sun. Then suddenly, when the reader has almost forgotten the symbolism of this pageant, Thompson utters a single line which, like the sun, sheds its radiance on all that has gone before and makes of every verse a hymn of praise to Christ, the Sun of Justice. In the first poem this line is:

Against eternity?9

In the second it is a more climactic one:

To Thee, 0 Sun -- or is't perchance to Christ?10

In "Ode to the Setting Sun" some forty lines of explicit reference to Christ follow, and only in the after-strain appears the relation between the sun of Thompson's Song and Christ's Cross. In "Orient Ode," however, the stanza that follows the climax of the poem is, as it were, Thompson's apologia for his symbolic vision of Christ as the center of the universe.

Different, again, is the method Thompson uses in "Assumpta Maria," in which he borrows phrase after phrase from the divine office as he puts into Mary's mouth the answer to man's question: Who is she that

9 Line 204.

10 Line 195.
ascendeth on high, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in battle array? The Poem may well be called a litany recited not by man to Mary, but by Mary to man. Here, too, mythological terminology is combined with Biblical and liturgical imagery. But despite its evident borrowings from the language of liturgy, the poem is distinctly Thompson's work and may be regarded as an outstanding example of the marriage of Catholic thought and poetic diction.

In his other poems Thompson's debt to the liturgy is not so specific as it is in the two sun poems and in "Assumpta Maria." Here the liturgical element consists in the application of the language of the liturgy to various phases of nature. Calvert Alexander, as has been pointed out, remarks that "Thompson has frequently been called 'a liturgical poet,' sometimes for no better reason than that he makes use of metaphors, such as 'blanch-amiced clouds,' 'solemn thurifer,' 'twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,' and the like, borrowed from ecclesiastical ritual, and plastered upon the face of nature as a sort of rhetorical cosmetic." The careful student of Thompson perceives, however, that these metaphors are not "plastered upon the face of nature," and that such imaginative and romantic use of the Church's ritual, far from lessening Thompson's achievement as poet of modern Catholicity, rather argues for an even deeper penetration into the liturgy then is manifested in the three long poems that have been examined in detail. For it shows that Thompson's study of the liturgy has become a part of his very nature and that he has no choice but to sing his

11 Cf. lines 33-4.
12 The Catholic Literary Revival, 167.
songs in the language of his heart.

Several of Thompson's critics have commented on his achievement as poet of modern Catholicity. Braybrooke declares that he owes his greatness to this, that "he has shown the Modern World what it needs to be shown every single day of its life, that the realities are the monopoly of the poets, that it is they who allow men to know the delights of God, that it is that little band of immortals, caring not one whit for fortune, who carry on the work of telling man of that part of him which only matters -- his everlasting soul." Thompson will never be a popular poet. He will never attract those who are too firmly anchored to the things of this world. Ordinary readers will be content with ordinary poets, of which there is no dearth. But those of a finer and gentler spirit who are tempted to follow the darting of his swallow-like fancy into the far skies of exalted imagery and supernal thought, Thompson's poetry will be welcome. And they will lay him aside with a feeling of great satisfaction and earnest thanksgiving, that our literature has been enriched by the songs of a poet so Catholic, so inspiring, so mystically sweet.

Edward J. O'Brien's comment is the most specific. "Francis Thompson," he writes, "has done the world an inestimable good, if the world will but recognize it, for he has succeeded in cloaking all things vividly with the Divine Presence." Here is the clue to Thompson's greatness. As poet

14 "Francis Thompson, Poet and Mystic," *Catholic World*, XCIX (1914), 608.
15 "Francis Thompson," *Poet Lore*, XIX (1908), 300.
of the liturgy his achievement is neither more nor less than fidelity to the vision of which he speaks at the end of "Orient Ode," a vision which has its origin in a passage from the Mass:

"By this, O Singer, know we if thou see. When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here, When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there, Believe them: yea, and this -- then art thou seer, When all thy crying clear Is but: Lo here! Lo there! -- ah me, lo everywhere!"\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{16}\) Lines 206-11; of. Gospel for the twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost.
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The thesis, "Francis Thompson the Poet of Modern Catholicity", written by Sister Marita O'Connell, S.C.C., has been accepted by the Graduate School with reference to form, and by the readers whose names appear below, with reference to content. It is, therefore, accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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