

Praise for *100 Great Catholic Poems*

“The current Catholic literary revival takes a huge leap forward with this essential new book. *100 Great Catholic Poems* not only lives up to its ambitious title but exceeds it. Editor Sally Read presents an arresting cross section of the best poems from antiquity to the modern age; then she adds a useful and engaging note for each selection. This anthology helps restore a lost legacy to the Church. Whether you are a student, a teacher, or a cardinal, you will want this book on your shelf.”

—**Dana Gioia**, former California Poet Laureate and Chairman
of the National Endowment for the Arts

“What an extraordinary gift Sally Read’s *100 Great Catholic Poems* is! Even with poems many of us may already know—the Magnificat, Dante, Shakespeare, Crashaw, Hopkins, and, yes, Wallace Stevens—her commentaries on each of these blessed one hundred are so vivid and insightful that we find ourselves wrapped again and again in an aura of stunning, grace-filled light. And then there are those poems we may never have come across before, shining here like the hidden diamonds they are. What a treasure this book is! Read it. I promise you will indeed be changed by the encounter.”

—**Paul Mariani**, University Professor of English Emeritus at
Boston College

“In this superb anthology, Sally Read has somehow taken the vast sweep of Catholic wisdom and civilization and distilled it as a single volume. With poems spanning the centuries, from Mary’s Magnificat to the stuttering prophetic joy of David Jones and beyond, *100 Great Catholic Poems* will make not only a fine initiation into the Catholic literary tradition for many readers but also a portal into the profound vision and mystery of the Church. Read’s helpful commentaries illuminate the poems and draw even the most wary reader into the sacramental imagination.”

—**James Matthew Wilson**, author of *The Strangeness of the Good* and Professor of Humanities at the University of St. Thomas

“A truly absorbing anthology! Sally Read brings to the poems selected—an impressive sweep over two millennia—an originality of insight that opens the door for the reader into a new world of vision, refreshing our understanding not only of some of the great classics of the tradition but also of work much less familiar yet no less compelling. For any serious lover of sacred verse, this is a must-have anthology.”

—**Fr. Paul Murray, OP**, author of *Light at the Torn Horizon*

100 Great Catholic Poems

100 Great Catholic Poems

EDITED AND WITH COMMENTARY

BY SALLY READ

Published by Word on Fire, Elk Grove Village, IL 60007

© 2023 by Word on Fire Catholic Ministries

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved

Cover design by Michael Stevens, typesetting by Marlene Burrell,
and interior art direction by Michael Stevens

Scripture excerpts are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition (copyright © 1989, 1993), used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. All rights reserved worldwide.

Copyrights and permissions:

“The Closed House” by Paul Claudel, from *Five Great Odes*, trans. Jonathan Geltner (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico, 2020). Used by permission of publisher. The poem “To God the Father,” from Edith Stein, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marian Maskulak, pg. 81, 26 lines; the poem “The Paradoxes of Love” from Hadewijch, *The Complete Works*, trans. Mother Columba Hart, pgs. 344–345, 50 lines; the poem “The Dark Night” from *St. John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, pg. 56, 40 lines, used by permission of Paulist Press. “Soldier’s Bathing” from F.T. Prince, *Collected Poems 1935–1992*, reprinted by kind permission of Carcanet Press, Manchester, UK. “About Those Words, ‘My Beloved Is Mine’” by Teresa of Avila, trans. Dana Delibovi, first printed in *Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry*. Used by permission. “On Approaching Forty” by Mario Luzi, trans. Dana Gioia. Used by permission. “The Pearl” Copyright © Simon Armitage. Used by permission. “One Flesh” by Elizabeth Jennings, from *The Collected Poems*, ed. Emma Mason (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012). Used by permission. “O rosary that recalled my tear” by Aithbhreac Inghean Corcadil, trans. Derick Thomson, reproduced with permission of Edinburgh University Press through PLSclear. Charles Péguy, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* ©1996. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI. Reprinted by permission of the publisher; all rights reserved. “A, a, a Domine Deus” by David Jones, from *The Sleeping Lord*, published by Faber and Faber Ltd. Used by permission. Excerpt from Augustine’s *Confessions*, trans. Francis J. Sheed, used by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. “Total Virgin” from *The Selected Poems of Jessica Powers* used by permission of ICS Publications. “O Virga ac Diadema,” trans. Nathaniel M. Campbell / International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies. Used by permission. The poems by Patrick Kavanaugh are reprinted from *Selected Poems*, edited by Paul Muldoon (Wake Forest University Press, 2022), by kind permission of the Trustees of the Estate of the late Katherine B. Kavanaugh, through the Jonathan Williams Literary Agency. “To the Immaculate Virgin. On a Winter Night,” “The Annunciation,” “Mosaic: St. Praxed’s,” and “Splendor Paternae Gloria, from the Latin of St. Ambrose” by Thomas Merton, from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, copyright ©1949 by Our Lady of Gethsemani Monastery. “Ikön: The Harrowing of Hell” by Denise Levertov, from *A Door in the Hive*, copyright ©1937 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. Translation of “Against the Burden of Sickness” by Gregory of Nazianzus used by permission of Suzanne Abrams Rebillard. William Langland, *Piers Plowman, The C Version*, trans. George Economou (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 194–195, reprinted with permission of the University of Pennsylvania Press. “The Shortest Days” by Anne Porter, from *Living Things*. Copyright © 2006 by Anne Porter. Reprinted with permission from Steerforth Press. “Ave Virgo Mater Christi” from *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Life and Thought*, by Rachel Fulton Brown. Copyright © Columbia University Press. Reprinted with permission of

Columbia University Press. Additional stanzas from “Mary and Mariology” blog used by permission of Rachel Fulton Brown. Translation of “Seek Yourself in Me” by Teresa of Avila © Paul Murray, 2012, from *In the Grip of Light: The Dark and Bright Journey of Christian Contemplation*, published by Continuum, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Translations of “Arrived from Across a Stormy Sea” by Michelangelo and “The Canticle of the Creatures” by Francis of Assisi © Paul Murray, 2019, from *God’s Spies: Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Other Poets of Vision*, published by T&T Clark, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. Used by permission. Prologue from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, trans. Nevill Coghill, translation copyright © 1951, 1958, 1960, 1975, 1977 by Nevill Coghill. Used by permission of Penguin Classics, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. “To an Old Philosopher in Rome” from *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* by Wallace Stevens, copyright © 1954 by Wallace Stevens and copyright renewed 1982 by Holly Stevens. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Excerpts from *Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, translated and edited by Anthony Esolen, translation copyright © 2002 by Penguin Random House LLC. Used by permission of Modern Library, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved. Excerpts from “The Dream of Rood” and “The Seafarer” trans. Burton Raffel, from *Poems and Prose in the Old English* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Reprinted by permission. *Purgatorio*: Cantos X–XI, from *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri, trans. John Ciardi. Copyright 1954, 1957, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1965, 1967, 1970 by the Ciardi Family Publishing Trust. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. “The Assumption—An Answer” by Alfred Noyes reprinted by permission of the Society of Authors. Translation of “Prayer 88” by Gregory of Narek used by permission of Thomas Samuelian. “Embraced by New Time” by John Paul II © Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used by permission. “We awaken in Christ’s body” from *The Poetry of the Enlightened Heart* by Stephen Mitchell. Copyright © 1989 by Stephen Mitchell. “Voices of Poor People: A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” and “A Confession” from *New and Collected Poems: 1931–2001* by Czeslaw Milosz. Copyright © 1988, 1991, 1995, 2001 by Czeslaw Milosz Royalties, Inc. “I cannot dance, O Lord” from *Women in Praise of the Sacred* by Jane Hirshfield. Copyright © 1994 by Jane Hirshfield. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers. “Lux Perpetua” by George Mackay Brown reproduced with permission of Hodder and Stoughton Limited through PLSclear. Translation of “Maidens Like White Lilies” from Paul Glynn, *A Song for Nagasaki*, © 2009, republished with permission of Ignatius Press through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. Jacobsen, Josephine, *In the Crevice of Time: New and Collected Poems*, pp. 47. © 1995 Josephine Jacobsen. Reprinted with permission of Johns Hopkins University Press.

All other poems are in the public domain or used under fair use, or if not, all efforts have been made to contact copyright holders to secure permission. Minor adjustments have occasionally been made on excerpted material for consistency and readability.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews. For more information, contact Word on Fire Catholic Ministries, PO Box 97330, Washington, DC 20090-7330 or email contact@wordonfire.org.

First printing, November 2023

ISBN: 978-1-68578-074-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023911449

To Fabio

Contents

Acknowledgments	xv
Introduction	xvi
A Word about Order and Poetic Terms	xi
“The Magnificat” <i>The Virgin Mary, Recorded by Luke</i>	3
“A Hymn to Christ the Savior” <i>Clement of Alexandria</i>	6
“Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh” (Excerpt) <i>St. Ephrem</i>	10
“Against the Burden of Sickness” (Excerpt) <i>St. Gregory of Nazianzus</i>	14
“Splendor Paternae Gloriam” <i>St. Ambrose</i>	18
“Late Have I Loved Thee” from the <i>Confessions</i> <i>St. Augustine</i>	22
“The Deer’s Cry” (St. Patrick’s Breastplate) <i>St. Patrick</i>	27
“Columcille Fecit” (Columba Made It) <i>St. Columba</i>	32
“Donal Og” (Young Donald) <i>Anonymous</i>	36
“The Dream of the Rood” (Excerpt) <i>Anonymous</i>	41
“To Mary and Her Son” (Excerpt) <i>Blathmac, Son of Cú Brettan</i>	46
“The Song of Manchán the Hermit” <i>Anonymous</i>	50
“Pangur Bán” <i>An Irish Monk</i>	54
“The Seafarer” (Excerpt) <i>Anonymous</i>	58
“Prayer 88” of the <i>Book of Lamentations</i> (Excerpt) <i>St. Gregory of Narek</i>	63
“We Awaken in Christ’s Body” <i>St. Symeon the New Theologian</i>	68
“The Crucifixion” <i>An Irish Monk</i>	72
“O Virga ac Diadema” <i>St. Hildegard of Bingen</i>	75
“The Canticle of the Creatures” <i>St. Francis of Assisi</i>	81
“The Paradoxes of Love” <i>Hadewijch</i>	86
“Adoro Te Devote” <i>St. Thomas Aquinas</i>	90
“Ave Virgo Mater Christi” (Excerpt) <i>Walter of Wimborne</i>	95

C O N T E N T S

“I Cannot Dance, O Lord” <i>Mechthild of Magdeburg</i>	100
Preface to the <i>Divine Comedy</i>	103
Canto 1 of <i>Inferno</i> (Excerpt) <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	105
Canto 5 of <i>Inferno</i> (Excerpt) <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	110
Canto 10 of <i>Purgatorio</i> (Excerpt) <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	116
Canto 11 of <i>Purgatorio</i> (Excerpt) <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	120
Canto 31 of <i>Paradiso</i> (Excerpt) <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	125
Canto 33 of <i>Paradiso</i> <i>Dante Alighieri</i>	132
“Pearl” (Excerpt) <i>Gawain Poet</i>	143
Passus 20 of <i>Piers Plowman</i> (Excerpt) <i>William Langland</i>	148
“The Monk” from the General Prologue to <i>The Canterbury Tales</i> <i>Geoffrey Chaucer</i>	153
“There Is No Rose of Such Virtue” <i>Anonymous</i>	158
“O Rosary that Recalled My Tear” <i>Aithbhreac Inghean Corcadail</i>	161
“Quia Amore Languet” (Excerpt) <i>Anonymous</i>	166
“Done Is a Battle on the Dragon Black” <i>William Dunbar</i>	171
“Too Long My Chaste Love” <i>Vittoria Colonna</i>	175
“Arrived from Across a Stormy Sea,” after Sonnet 285 <i>Michelangelo</i>	178
“About Those Words, ‘My Beloved Is Mine’” <i>St. Teresa of Avila</i>	182
“Seek Yourself in Me” <i>St. Teresa of Avila</i>	185
“The Dark Night” <i>St. John of the Cross</i>	188
“Although by Night” <i>St. John of the Cross</i>	193
“Upon the Death of M. Edmund Campion, One of the Society of the Holy Name of Jesus” <i>St. Henry Walpole</i>	197
“The Burning Babe” <i>St. Robert Southwell</i>	203
“Saint Peter’s Complaint” (Excerpt) <i>St. Robert Southwell</i>	206
“The Kissing Sonnet” from Act I, Scene 5, of <i>Romeo and Juliet</i> <i>William Shakespeare</i>	210

C O N T E N T S

“Sonnet 116” <i>William Shakespeare</i>	214
“I have of late . . .” from Act 2, Scene 2, of <i>Hamlet</i> <i>William Shakespeare</i>	217
“The Flaming Heart, Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa” (Excerpt) <i>Richard Crashaw</i>	222
“The Holy Eucharist” <i>Pedro Calderón de la Barca</i>	225
“The Hind and the Panther” (Excerpt) <i>John Dryden</i>	228
“A Virgin Life” <i>Jane Barker</i>	232
“An Essay on Man” (Excerpt) <i>Alexander Pope</i>	236
“The Pillar of the Cloud” <i>St. John Henry Newman</i>	242
“The Dream of Gerontius” (Excerpt) <i>St. John Henry Newman</i>	245
“The Language of the Church” <i>Georgiana Fullerton</i>	253
“As Kingfishers Catch Fire” <i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	257
“The Windhover” <i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	261
“God’s Grandeur” <i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	265
“My Own Heart Let Me More Have Pity On” <i>Gerard Manley Hopkins</i>	268
“Magna Est Veritas” <i>Coventry Patmore</i>	272
“The Hound of Heaven” <i>Francis Thompson</i>	275
“The Dark Angel” <i>Lionel Johnson</i>	284
“To Scatter Flowers” <i>St. Thérèse of Lisieux</i>	289
“Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration” <i>Ernest Dowson</i>	293
“The Ballad of Reading Gaol” (Excerpt) <i>Oscar Wilde</i>	297
“The Donkey” <i>G.K. Chesterton</i>	307
“The Unknown God” <i>Alice Meynell</i>	310
“The Closed House” of <i>Five Great Odes</i> (Excerpt) <i>Paul Claudel</i>	313
“The Portal of the Mystery of Hope” (Excerpt) <i>Charles Péguy</i>	318
“The House of Christmas” <i>G.K. Chesterton</i>	323
“Trees” <i>Joyce Kilmer</i>	327
“I See His Blood upon the Rose” <i>Joseph Mary Plunkett</i>	330

C O N T E N T S

“The Prayer of the Church” (Excerpt) <i>Gertrud von Le Fort</i>	333
“Mass at Dawn” <i>Roy Campbell</i>	338
“To God the Father” <i>St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein)</i>	341
“Still Falls the Rain” <i>Edith Sitwell</i>	345
“Soldiers Bathing” <i>F.T. Prince</i>	349
“A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto” <i>Czesław Miłosz</i>	355
“The Reed” <i>Caryll Houselander</i>	359
“Maidens Like White Lilies” <i>Takashi Nagai</i>	364
“Advent” <i>Patrick Kavanagh</i>	367
“A Christmas Childhood” <i>Patrick Kavanagh</i>	371
“Saint Isaac’s Church, Petrograd” <i>Claude McKay</i>	376
“To the Immaculate Virgin, on a Winter Night” <i>Thomas Merton</i>	379
“The Assumption—An Answer” <i>Alfred Noyes</i>	383
“Embraced by New Time” <i>Karol Wojtyła (Pope St. John Paul II)</i>	387
“The Prophet Lost in the Hills of Evening” <i>Hilaire Belloc</i>	390
“To an Old Philosopher in Rome” <i>Wallace Stevens</i>	394
“Mosaic: St Praxed’s” <i>Raissa Maritain</i>	401
“On Approaching Forty” <i>Mario Luzi</i>	404
“The Annunciation” <i>Thomas Merton</i>	408
“One Flesh” <i>Elizabeth Jennings</i>	412
“A, a, a, Domine Deus” <i>David Jones</i>	415
“Total Virgin” <i>Jessica Powers</i>	418
“A Confession” <i>Czesław Miłosz</i>	422
“Ikön: The Harrowing of Hell” <i>Denise Levertov</i>	425
“The Animals” <i>Josephine Jacobsen</i>	429
“The Shortest Days” <i>Anne Porter</i>	433
“Lux Perpetua” <i>George Mackay Brown</i>	437
A Glossary of Relevant Poetic Terms	440

Acknowledgments

No one man or woman can commentate on two thousand years of poetry, across multiple cultures and languages, without help from a number of people. I am immensely grateful to the following:

To Dr. Mark Doerksen for his assistance with Middle English, to Dr. Matthew Genung for answering my biblical queries, to Dr. Helena Tomko for telling me about Gertrud von Le Fort's poetry, to Dana Gioia for so generously introducing me to Mario Luzi, to Bevil Luck for introducing me to FT Prince and sharing so much of his knowledge, to Tim Bete for helpful suggestions and tracking down texts, to Pelé Cox for reminding me that in poetry you never stop learning and you should always take risks, to Pat Destito for his support and enthusiasm, to Rosaleen Howard and Paul Flynn for their willingness to help on Irish language matters, to Marta Prados for giving me insights into the Spanish of Saint Teresa, to Dr. Marie Cabaud Meaney for being an ever-willing pair of eyes and ears, to Kerry Lee Crabbe for being, as ever, a wellspring of knowledge, advice and grist, particularly about Shakespeare, to Father Paul Murray, OP, for sharing both his books and his wisdom, to Father Gregory Hrynkiw for being my on-call theologian and teaching me so much about Gregory of Nazianzus over the years, to my mum for photographing hundreds of pages from books back home, to Matthew Becklo and the team at Word on Fire for their vision, kindness, and expertise, and to my daughter Celia Bottone for her unerring sagacity and guiding me through *La Commedia*.

All lapses in judgment are my own.

Introduction

Before we begin our journey, it might be as well to define our terms: *poems*, *Catholic*, and *great*. If anyone wonders why certain poems or poets are included in this anthology, the answer should be contained in this introduction—and, of course, in the works that follow.

Poems

I was twenty-five years old when I had my first encounter with a poem in this book. I was working as a nurse in London, and while tending to the variously tested and battered hearts on a hospital ward, my own had been broken. The minutes of the frenetic London days were painful in their passing. The city—it has been said many times before—was lonely in its endless succession of faces and meetings. But sitting in my flat one evening I read this line: “It is late last night the dog was speaking of you.”

I was struck at once by its strangeness (the “error” in the tenses, the talking animal when this was obviously no poem for children). There was much more I did not understand as I read on. The images were outlandish to me, the context alien. And yet it spoke to my heart. I was soothed, but electrified. The poem would travel with me for a long time.

My early days as a lover of poetry were marked by similar feelings of elation, bewilderment, and the feeling that I had stumbled on the truth. No other literary genre is so concerned with truth—not only in the sense of writing about true things, as the Irish bards did, or as the confessional poets do as they

dish us their personal lives, but in the scalpel-precise rendering of things that humans cannot otherwise articulate. This, perhaps, is what sets poetry apart from other genres: by using image and metaphor and the music of language, poets lift the human senses beyond the everyday. They show us the woven relationships between all things. They link heaven and earth and leave enough space for the silence of mystery, for the truth that remains wordless on human tongues.

In the years that followed my poetic encounter with that first line of “Donal Og” (Young Donald),¹ I began, incrementally, to devote my life to poetry. In whatever job or country I found myself, I would inevitably turn to poems to make sense of my situation—and to try and help others to make sense of theirs. I have used poetry with dementia sufferers and schoolchildren, retreatants and English language students. My biggest challenge has always been in persuading participants that they did not need to understand, word for word, everything that a poem said. Poems were not riddles: there was not one answer that clever readers understood. I have tried to convince people that poetry is like music: we should let it wash over us, listening to the sounds and responding instinctively. And over the years, I have witnessed similar experiences to my own occurring again and again. Even people who professed no interest in poetry, who did not understand it, or who had never read it would ask if they could photocopy a page, or stay after a session to write out some lines. Educated or not, poetry lover or no, in my experience, anyone with a story of their own is hungry for the truth and consolation that poetry can bring.

1. See page 39.

What has all this to do with Catholicism?

Well, that same bewildered yet convinced sensation would come upon me during my conversion to the Catholic faith. As I stood on the threshold of churches watching the symmetry and beauty of the Mass unfold before me, with its symbols (the candles, the incense), its images and figurative language (“the Body of Christ,” the “dewfall” of the Spirit), I did not understand every word, nor every action at the altar. But I was arrested by the Mass’ structure. As any man knows when listening to Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* that there is not one note amiss, I knew the Church’s rightness as I witnessed its liturgy and prayer. I saw it as a poem: the seamless working of form and meaning within the Mass was reminiscent to me of the tight interrelation of shape and content in a piece of poetry. Every word, every gesture of every liturgy mattered. What I also understood, as a convert poet, was that God the Father was *the* poet. By sending his Son into the world through Jesus Christ, he put flesh on the ineffable. He made tangible the ungraspable. He explained the inexplicable. And, fundamentally, that is what any poet is trying to do.

As I lined up in those early days to receive the Eucharist, I thought about how being in the Church is like stepping into a poem. Take a famous line like “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Shakespeare conjures, in his perfect words, the colors, flowers, and beauty of a day. In a poetic sense, the beloved of that sonnet then *becomes* the day, and the day becomes her. The poet will never know a summer day without thinking of her, nor her without thinking of a summer’s day. This is what metaphors do: they couple two separate entities by what they have in common. But in reality, the woman and day remain distinct.

Similarly (not identically), Catholics know, as they walk up to the altar, that the bread (which is white as flesh) and the wine (which is red as blood) *have become* the Flesh and Blood of Christ. But *this* becoming (unlike Shakespeare’s metaphor) is literal. The bread and wine are not “like” flesh and blood anymore; after the consecration, they *are* Flesh and Blood. The mechanism of what happens at the altar is truly poetic—it has the same engagement with what things are like, and how they become linked—but then it goes further. It fulfills what every poem promises. In the Eucharist, “types and shadows have their ending,” as Thomas Aquinas wrote in “Pange Lingua.”² The Mass rips through simile and metaphor and leads us to reality.

It stands to reason that poetry is evident everywhere in the Catholic faith. Humankind is always resorting to metaphor to understand, even partially, what is ineffable. So, Catholics speak poetry from Matins to Compline, in every Psalm, prayer, and song. They live it in every litany to Our Lady (who is expressed in metaphorical terms like no one else in history—read Walter of Wimborne’s extravagant “Ave Virgo Mater Christi”³). Poetry is the language of Catholicism.

“I don’t read poetry,” several devout, practicing Catholics have remarked to me over the years. “I don’t get it.” Although they may not be reading poems in poetry books, they are, nonetheless, picking up a poem with their first coffee of the day (a Psalm). When they recite the Litany of Loreto or the Magnificat, they are also engaging with the genre. The truths of the faith have *always* been transmitted through poetry, because it is memorable; because its images embed in our hearts and minds; because some things are too complex for stark prose.

2. Thomas Aquinas, “Pange lingua,” in Paul Murray, *Aquinas at Prayer: The Bible, Mysticism and Poetry* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 192.

3. See page 95.

Thomas Aquinas, who was ambivalent about poetry's ability to speak truth (though he wrote poetry himself), knew that it shares theology's reliance on metaphor: "The hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds."⁴ Poetry shows us the world's invisible connections and subtleties. It whispers past our consciousness to the place where we also stand in prayer, barely beginning to apprehend mystery. "Her concealment," writes Hadewijch about God's love within these pages, "reveals what can be known of her."⁵

Very much aware of the copious use of poetry within the Catholic faith, the great challenge for me in selecting these poems was in discerning where to draw my lines!

Prayer

Early on, I realized that prayers should not be included, for the simple reason that if they were, the book would quickly become a book of prayer. Prayers, though often beautifully worded and full of poetry's characteristic uses of image, linguistic music, and even rhyme, are written for direct communication with God, not for our fellow men and women. When choosing these poems, this was the first of my self-imposed boundaries, the following of which shaped the book like a sculptor with a modeling knife. I often grieved the off-cuts that fell to the floor. But I saw that my ruthlessness was bringing forth an extraordinary and unique shape.

Yet all rules have exceptions. The Fathers of the Church wrote poetry as a way of teaching the faith, and the form of their poems is often very similar to prayer, with address to God, petition, etc. It would be foolish to cast these aside as

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.9 ad 2.

5. Hadewijch, "The Paradoxes of Love." See page 88.

non-poems. Early Christian poetry was often indistinguishable from theology. In fact, St. Gregory the Theologian was named as such for his poetry. St. Patrick's later prayer, "The Deer's Cry," is so poetic that it is anthologized in secular books and has been set to music many times.⁶ Its direction is "out" to men and women as well as "up" to God. It is even possible that the saint's original prayer was shaped into the poem's compelling form by another poetic pen (and certainly, in turn, by the translator). Later, Anne Porter and Caryll Houselander, among others, would deliberately blur the lines between poetry and prayer, as Thomas Aquinas did so many years before them. This is a very Catholic art, a very Catholic way of praying, a very Catholic way of writing poetry. So, although most prayers had to be excluded, I have brought in several that sufficiently cross the boundary into poetry, taking into account both the author's aim in writing the piece and the historical-literary context.

Hymns

Another consideration for an editor of a Catholic anthology is the hymn. Can songs be included? The earliest lyric poetry in Greece was often set to music, and St. Ephrem and St. Ambrose later used tunes to make their didactic poetry memorable for their flocks. Hildegard of Bingen liked to write musical settings for her poems. Many other poetic works, like John Henry Newman's "The Pillar of the Cloud," were set to music later.⁷ All of these poets I included. However, my modeling knife twitched, and I threw out hymns more specifically composed for sung worship. A determining attribute of poetry is that it stands alone. It does not need accompaniment; the language makes its

6. See page 27.

7. See page 242.

own unpredictable music. (It is worth bearing in mind that the word “hymn,” particularly as applied to the work of Gregory of Nazianzus, Ephrem, and Clement of Alexandria, means poem, as well as song, of praise.)

Prose

The next cut with the modeling knife when considering the word “poetry” was, of course, prose. How much glorious, shimmering prose has been written by Julian of Norwich, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Clare of Assisi, and St. Augustine! Dozens of sections of their writings could be chopped up on the page and a poem created (and the internet routinely does just that). But, in the interests of the form that was revealing itself to me, I stuck with *poetry*. The reader will by now not be surprised to hear that there are grey areas surrounding this rule. William Shakespeare sometimes abandoned blank verse in his plays, not only as a means of signaling less exalted thought and speech, but also—especially in later works—as a way of changing pace and emotional register and drawing *more* attention, not less, to the words. A prose speech from *Hamlet* (a play that Harold Bloom described as “of no genre” and “the most unlimited” of all poems⁸) is therefore included.⁹ (The issue of including Shakespeare as a Catholic poet is discussed in the next section.)

A passage from St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is also here.¹⁰ These are famous lines so poetically wrought, written with such symmetry and form, that it would be a crime against Catholic poetry not to include them. Their inclusion is testimony to the fact that the genres sometimes blur and that true poetry can live in diverse places.

8. Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).

9. “I have of late . . .” from act 2, scene 2, of *Hamlet*. See page 217.

10. See page 22.

Scripture

The most important of those places, of course, is Scripture. The Bible is packed with poetry. The Psalms and Song of Solomon are, themselves, the most wondrous religious verse ever written. But their inclusion would have made for a biblical anthology and dwarfed the efforts of men and women in the two thousand years since the birth, death, and Resurrection of Christ. The coming of Jesus seemed a good chronological place to begin a Catholic anthology, and as an acknowledgment of God's poetry, we begin with Our Lady's spontaneous song as she exalts the Poem within her.¹¹ Mary is, in a very real sense, the Mother of poetry, and in a clear way she heralds the poetic endeavors of those to come.

Catholic Poems

It is tempting to say that every poem is a Catholic poem. Any fully realized poem is intimately engaged with, as Flannery O'Connor said of fiction, the salvation or damnation of the soul.¹² Whereas O'Connor was talking more of her characters' souls, the poet is concerned with the human imagination pitted against chaos. Poets are looking for form and connection—a search that, more often than not, leads them to beauty and truth. They are—whether religious or not—striving to see the integrity of creation. In this sense, they (and their poems) are reaching out to the divine. In their clear-sightedness, their industrious quest for meaning, poets are, as Percy Bysshe

11. "The Magnificat." See page 3.

12. Flannery O'Connor, "Novelist and Believer," in *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 167.

Shelley once wrote, “the unacknowledged legislators of the world.”¹³

As they create order out of chaos, poets are also like Adam in the garden of Eden, naming each plant and creature. Poets name to know the world better—to illuminate things, emotions, and events and their place in creation. There are no other themes for writers of living poems—even if they do not believe in God.

Transcendent Poetry

But there is no poet on the planet worth his or her salt who does not admit that a good poem comes from some place over which they have no control. The atheistic might say it is their unconscious that does the work: writing poetry is only a matter of relaxing the consciousness and allowing the unplumbed depths of the mind to throw up astonishing matter onto the page. The more vaguely spiritual, though, will point to a transcendent force that inspires them. W.B. Yeats called it the *Spiritus Mundi*. Ted Hughes believed that poets were shamanic: poems were a means of healing. When the atheist Shelley wrote “Adonais,” a eulogy for his dear friend John Keats, he reached for the imagery of the gods. It was always this way. For the Romans, poets were seers. No one believed that the weight of poetic words came from one man or woman’s fallible brain. In other words, poetry, above all literary genres, has a special relationship not only with truth but with *transcendent* truth.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that references to God, and even Catholicism, show up regularly in the work of non-Catholic poets. The Virgin Mary and Christ are both

13. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1904), 90.

mentioned a surprising number of times in Sylvia Plath's work. Anne Sexton, who arguably sailed near to actual conversion, wrote extensively about God and her spiritual journey. More controversially, for the edits of my ruthless modeling knife, the poetry of Anglicans John Donne, George Herbert, and T.S. Eliot, to name but a few, is known as being among the most sublime religious poetry ever written.

So what do we gain by losing all of these fine names in a *Catholic* anthology? At first I was diffident. I stood before my vast mass of clay (the entire number of great Christian poems written in the last two thousand years) and could see no method in seeking out what was purely "Catholic." I was not alone. Numerous anthologies of Christian or spiritual poetry have been published and are being published, and for the most part, editors are content to see God in many places (rightly) and to see the post-Reformation division as a matter unfit for the classification of poems. This view has my sympathy. But as I began to cut, to pare, to shape the clay in search of truly *Catholic* poetry, my breath was taken by the form that continued to emerge.

A Communion of Poetic Saints

The song that began on Mary's lips was taken up by the early saints, who plunged deep into God's poetry to teach the new faith, to express its joy, to correct heresy, and to understand themselves within the great drama of salvation. Catholic poetry quickly became, also, a historical record—of mysticism, persecution, martyrdom, ecstasy, conversion, and renewal. A good proportion of the poets here were not solely poets. They were reformers (Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross), popes (Pope John Paul II), mystics (Teresa and John again, but also

Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch, Caryl Houselander, Symeon the New Theologian). They were men and women who, in pain, had recourse only to their faith, and their expression of this was poetry (Takashi Nagai, Henry Walpole). They were journalists and essayists (G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc). They were theologians and philosophers, whose finest thought was sometimes best rendered in verse (Sts. Thomas, Symeon, Ambrose, Gregory, Ephrem, and Edith Stein). They were also poets so steeped in the religion of their age that the signs and concerns of their works were effortlessly Catholic (William Langland, Geoffrey Chaucer).

The Beating Catholic Heart

But not all the poems in this book have obviously Catholic (rather than simply Christian) themes, like the Blessed Virgin, the Blessed Sacrament, or purgatory. As I read hundreds of poems, I tentatively began to be able to identify what we mean by a “Catholic poem.” *It beats with a Catholic heart*, I started to hear myself think when I found a candidate text. But I had to define what I meant by that. It often seemed to hinge on a physicality that could only ever be found in the poetry of a faith that believes that its adherents take God in their mouths. “I have felt for His Wounds,” David Jones cries in “A, a, a Domine Deus.”¹⁴ “It is her tenderness / Heats the dead world,” says Thomas Merton of Mary.¹⁵ “I trembled as His arms went round me,” says the cross itself in an eighth-century dream poem.¹⁶ This physicality is sensuous; it is erotic in the vein of the great forerunner Song of Solomon. “Upon my flowering

14. See page 417.

15. “The Annunciation.” See page 411.

16. “The Dream of the Rood.” See page 43.

breast / Which I kept wholly for him alone,” sings St. John of the Cross.¹⁷ “His lifeless sacred skin [will be] my page,” says Vittoria Colonna, taking this intimate relationship with the Word directly into the literary realm.¹⁸ Gregory of Narek sees *himself* as his devotional book.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Edith Sitwell envisions the entire city of London as the body of Christ, pelted by 1940 nails.²⁰ For Catholic poets, the relationship between Word and poem, Word and body, and Word and place is powerful.

But this beating Catholic heart goes beyond the obviously sensual in poetry. The Catholic poet takes God’s own poetry—of the Scriptures, of intimacy through the sacraments, of sacrifice and redemption—and runs with it. Even poems that do not have primarily religious themes can spring from this Catholic imagination and beat with a Catholic heart. “Donal Og,” the poem that so arrested me as a young woman, is steeped in the language of divine and human love. “O Rosary that Recalled my Tear” is a poem of grief, spoken through the sacramental rosary.²¹ A simple ninth-century poem about a monk and his cat might, at first glance, not contain much specifically Catholic, but it, too, springs from the Catholic imagination in its simple understanding of the interconnected web of creation.²²

Working within this creative and spiritual palette, our poets often call out to each other, sometimes unknowingly, across the centuries. The deer of Psalm 42 pops up in John Dryden.²³ Richard Crashaw’s “Flaming Heart” belongs to Teresa of Avila.²⁴

17. “The Dark Night.” See page 192.

18. “Too Long My Chaste Love.” See page 177.

19. “Prayer 54e” of the *Book of Lamentations*. See note on page 63.

20. “Still Falls the Rain.” See page 345.

21. Aithbhreac Inghean Corcadail, “O Rosary that Recalled my Tear.” See page 161.

22. “Pangur Bán.” See page 54.

23. “The Hind and the Panther.” See page 228.

24. “The Flaming Heart, Upon the Book and Picture of the Seraphical Saint Teresa.” See page 222.

The jeweled cross of “The Dream of the Rood” echoes in Will’s dream in *Piers Plowman*.²⁵ Christ is a swan to an anonymous medieval poet, a pelican to Thomas Aquinas, and a windhover to Gerard Manley Hopkins.²⁶ To Roy Campbell, Michelangelo, and the tenth-century author of “The Seafarer,” the Catholic life is best described by a voyage at sea.²⁷ Catholic poetry is a vibrant millennia-long conversation. The challenge for the Catholic poet is to stay rooted in this great conversation but at the same time to strike out, clear-eyed as Adam.

Making It New in the Tradition

This is because poetry “purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity,” as Shelley also said.²⁸ A poem should always, in some way, shock. It should discomfit. It has to be *new*, as Ezra Pound exhorted.²⁹ The normal reaction to a fine poem in the mind of the reader should usually be a silent question mark, followed by a shiver of recognition.

That, potentially, puts Catholic poets into a bit of a bind. They inhabit a world already highly structured in poetic terms. (The symbols have been taken—a rock, a candle, a chalice, wine, bread, water. The metaphorical landscape is ingrained. Even the figure of Jesus Christ himself is so laden with resonance that placing him in a poem spins the wheel for any poet.) Whereas the poet’s job is usually to stand in an empty field beside a bleak hedgerow and somehow transport the reader to

25. See “The Dream of the Rood,” page 41, and excerpt Passus 20 of *Piers Plowman*, page 148.

26. See “The Crucifixion,” page 72; “Adoro Te Devote,” page 90; and “The Windhover,” page 261.

27. See “Mass at Dawn,” page 338; “Arrived from Across a Stormy Sea,” page 178; and “The Seafarer,” page 58.

28. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*, 83.

29. Ezra Pound, *Make it New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

epiphany through incisive insight, Catholic poets, like Robert Southwell, Alexander Pope, and Denise Levertov, were already standing in the most finely articulated collection of symbols and order known to man. The cradle Catholic, lapsed Catholic, and deathbed revert Kathleen Raine wrote that she, personally, could never have tangled with ecclesiastical symbols in her poems. That water was muddied through millennia of use. *That* poem was already written.³⁰

Others managed it. They not only managed it; they added to our understanding of God's poetry by swimming in it, seeing it with new eyes, presenting it in innovative or simply ultra-lucid terms. Fire, in the hands of a Catholic poet, can never be just fire. It will always be the Holy Spirit. But by the time we reach Thomas Merton's "The Annunciation," the Spirit has become "sparks" that are scattering "seeds," and "blue things bud in Israel."³¹ The reader's eyes are peeled.

Merton, of course, was a convert. It is noteworthy that more than a third of the poems in this book are written by converts. In a world where a proportion of Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence, where prayers can become so rote we cease to hear them, where the sacrifice at the altar can become habitual—even dull!—and Christ's wounds begin to seem like the ceramic representations we see in bad church art, we need truths given to us in arresting ways. This Ephrem did in his day, as did St. Francis, Dante Alighieri and Oscar Wilde, Claude McKay and George Mackay Brown.

30. Kathleen Raine, introduction to *The Collected Poems of Kathleen Raine* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2001).

31. See page 410.

The Question of Shakespeare: Are All the Poets Here Catholic?

But all of these considerations of what makes a poem truly Catholic were enveloped by a deeper problem: Who truly counts as a Catholic poet? And does it finally matter? Perhaps the most controversial inclusion in this anthology of Catholic poems is the work of William Shakespeare. Whole books have been written about the identity of the greatest author in history. Joseph Pearce has argued unequivocally for the bard's Catholicism.³² Clare Asquith has provided intriguing insights that suggest he was a secret Catholic.³³ There are many more pro arguments, and many counter. I am not a Shakespeare scholar nor researcher, only a lover. I only know that Shakespeare, more than any other writer, reaches all dimensions—emotional, psychological, historical, epic, lyrical, and spiritual. He had a disturbingly modern eye for what the world would look like without God: “Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art,” says Lear (which F.T. Prince quotes in these pages).³⁴ At the same time, the reach of Shakespeare is up to heaven and down to hell and through the realm of purgatory: “Confin'd to fast in fires / Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature / Are burnt and purged away,” says Hamlet's father's ghost.³⁵ Yet I don't claim Shakespeare as Catholic primarily because of his writing on Catholic themes nor because of any special knowledge about his life. I include him here because the dynamism of the poetry is rooted in a Catholic mindset. His world is inhabited by the dead, spirits, the

32. Joseph Pearce, *The Quest for Shakespeare: The Bard of Avon and the Church of Rome* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008).

33. Clare Asquith, *Shadowplay: The Hidden Beliefs and Coded Politics of William Shakespeare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005).

34. *King Lear*, act 3, sc. 4. F.T. Prince, “Soldiers Bathing”; see page 349.

35. *Hamlet*, act 1, sc. 5.

perplexed living. Did any other writer, aside from Dante, have anxiety about the afterlife stamped through such a quantity of their lines? Did anyone explore so extensively the possibilities of human transformation and degradation through free will and the battling of supernatural powers (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*—even *King Lear* in its pre-Christian doom)? Isn't this very Catholic? Even the fact that so many claim Shakespeare for their own says to me that he was all-embracing of human emotion, far-reaching—that is, catholic, and therefore, Catholic.

Even, or especially, non-Catholic writer and poet Ted Hughes located the formula for the “Tragic Equation” of Shakespeare’s plays firmly in the context of a newly Puritan world where the Old Faith was being suffocated. Hughes recognized Shakespeare’s engagement with a madness that, even unconsciously, bewailed the brutal eradication of the feminine (what Catholics would identify as Mary’s unique role) from spiritual life.³⁶ But Hughes’ argument sprang also from a pagan perspective. And every critic has their bias. Certainly the debate about Shakespeare’s religion will not be solved within these pages. My inclusion of his work will be both opposed and applauded. But, for my cuts and keeps, there can be no doubt that Shakespeare’s poetry beats with a Catholic heart.

The reader will also note that Oscar Wilde is with us, even though he did not convert until his deathbed. There is ample evidence, however, that the question of Catholic conversion was on his mind throughout his life, and even more importantly, his poems became Catholic before he himself did (Edith Sitwell falls into this category too). Spiritual awakening does not always run in tandem with acquisition of a certificate of Baptism. I would go so far as to say that “The Ballad of Reading Gaol” is

36. Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992).

a poetic document of a man's conversion, and one of the most extraordinary and transformational poems in the Catholic canon: "How else but through a broken heart / May Lord Christ enter in?"³⁷ The same claim for Catholicism, in a curious, more mysterious sense, is made for Wallace Stevens' "To an Old Philosopher in Rome."³⁸ Like Wilde, Stevens' conversion was very late.

But otherwise, the reader will have the sense that every poet here knew what it was like to stand in line at the confessional, to hold a rosary, and to light a candle. None of these poems or poets are, as far as I am aware, ambivalent about the faith in the deepest sense. My modeler's knife had to shave off the poets who rejected the faith; those who did not want to be called Catholic; those who stated bluntly that their poetry was not Christian; and those whose great work was written before their conversion and was not, in essence, Catholic. Again, this meant pain and sacrifice.

Poet or "Narrator"

It is unfashionable of me to consider the heart or mindset of the poet. In an age where Roland Barthes heralded "the death of the author," the biography of the poet should not matter one jot to the text we are left with.³⁹ Most poets themselves are allergic to being given labels. The celebrated American poet Elizabeth Bishop reportedly refused to let her work be used in anthologies if she was only included because of her sex. I can't think of many professional poets who would care to be branded solely "Catholic" in their writing. Any prefix colors the readers'

37. Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." See page 305.

38. See page 394.

39. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen*, no. 5-6 (1967).

interpretation of their work; it potentially closes off meaning. But the poet's faith, I concluded, *does* matter in a book that is made up of Catholic poems.

Poets will often moan that readers think their poems are true accounts of their lives. I've moaned on this count myself. By and large, we should never confuse the narrator of a work of literature with the author. Poets often adopt a persona, or they write in dramatic form. Still, poetry remains among the most personal of all the genres. It seems to spring directly from the heart and from heaven. It boils and seethes with the writer's purest obsessions. Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland are examples of authorial distance and dramatization within these pages (though Langland, in particular, seems to be personally on fire at certain moments).⁴⁰ But throughout the centuries, from Clement of Alexandria to Elizabeth Jennings, what we see most is that poets are singing what touches them directly. The poetry here is urgent and relevant, precisely because it is those things to the writer. And when poets write on issues of faith, this seems to be magnified. There is no pretense. There is no posturing.

Bearing all this in mind, I've often taken the controversial step of speaking of the poet as the voice in the poem. Let's not be coy: we know that Oscar Wilde was in prison before he wrote "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," and that John Henry Newman was lost when he wrote "The Pillar of the Cloud." This poetry is real life.

It is also great.

40. See "The Monk" from *The Canterbury Tales*, page 153, and Passus 20 of *Piers Plowman*, page 148.

Great Catholic Poetry

As an adjective, *great* has an earth-shattering quality. Of course, we recognize the greatness of most of these poems, even out of a Catholic context. Much space in these pages has been devoted to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, a poem that has been claimed as the greatest ever written.⁴¹ It must certainly be seen as the greatest Catholic poem. No other poem transfuses so much blood into doctrine, so much drama into the unknown, so much flesh into the invisible. No other poem so expertly dramatizes the fundamental impetus of any sincere Catholic: to avoid hell and to see the face of God.

But standing there with my modeling knife, greatness was, perhaps, the most confusing quality to look for in a Catholic poem. Not many people, for example, would argue that Pope St. John Paul II was a great poet. Even fewer would make that claim for St. Thérèse of Lisieux. But the criteria for great Catholic poetry is, I discerned as I sculpted, subtly different than the claims made for great poetry in general.

A Poetry of Witness

During the Stalinist terror, the great Russian Orthodox poet Anna Akhmatova had to wait in line outside the prison in Leningrad to see her incarcerated son. She waited for months, standing in the cold with little hope. She stood with other mothers and wives, all freezing, all worn out by waiting and pain. One day she was recognized in the line by another woman, who asked the poet if she could write about what was happening. Akhmatova said that she could, and she would. And

41. See pages 103–142.

then a smile, Akhmatova wrote, passed over what had once been the woman's face.⁴²

Part of the greatness of certain poems resides in their unflinching witness of historical events. This does not mean to say that any old lines written about a historic event will do, nor that Henry Walpole should be compared with Anna Akhmatova. But given that Walpole was splattered with blood as he witnessed a brother hanged, drawn, and quartered in the city of London (and given that he had a good degree of poetic talent), it is fitting that his poem about that event should be included with the Catholic greats.⁴³

Spiritual Greats

But poetic greatness of the unconventional kind is not only found in historical accounts. When a man has a talent for writing and is a committed and gifted contemplative; when he is shot, and forgives his would-be assassin; when his prayer life is so evidently mystical that his insights seem to come directly from the divine—when that man writes poems, they are riveting witness to a place of transcendence that few have seen. I have no reservation whatsoever in calling much of John Paul II's poetry great.

In a similar vein, when a girl in a Carmelite convent becomes one of the greatest spiritual guides of our age; when she enters into the Catholic imagination with her poetry and adds to that imagination, carrying it into the next century—I feel that excluding her from the Catholic poetic canon would be unwise. Thérèse of Lisieux used poetry not as a sophisticated

42. Anna Akhmatova, "Instead of a Preface," introduction to *Requiem*.

43. "Upon the Death of M. Edmund Campion, One of the Society of the Holy Name of Jesus." See page 197.

worker of language but as a master of poetic ideas. Without her poetic vision, the canon would be diminished.

Greats in Translation

In any case, we are not lacking in poems that, by any standard in this world, would be called great. We have Shakespeare; we also have those trailblazers Chaucer and Hopkins, among many others who would be considered a part of the mainstream canon. But I was often frustrated by the knowledge that many great Catholic poems existed in other languages for which we lack even adequate translations.

It is only because of the endeavor and mastery of his translators that Dante's journey is accessible to most of us and can be happily included here. As I gathered my "soft clay" of contents, I had to be careful only to include poems in translation that truly rendered at least something of the greatness of the original. We are very fortunate to have resonant English-language versions not only of Dante but of Paul Claudel, Thomas Aquinas, and Mario Luzi, among others. Despite this being primarily an English-language volume, I'm glad to note that the poets come from twenty countries (and from the first century through the end of the twentieth).

The Minor and the Living

Any century will yield only a small number of great poems. It must be the biggest temptation for the editor of an anthology such as this to haul minor poets out of the dim past, dust them off, and claim them as great. I have striven, earnestly, not to do so. If a poet within these pages is minor, then the poem itself

will have something of that linguistic compression and reach that indicates greatness.

A difficult but wise decision was made to exclude living poets. Greatness needs to stand some test of time; dust needs to settle on the fashions and predilections of the day to see what endures. But readers should be in no doubt that fine poetry that engages with the Catholic tradition is being written. More, it is flourishing, and will certainly yield more “greats” in the years to come.

The Female Voice

And the number of great female Catholic poets is set to grow in what has been sometimes rocky ground over the last centuries. “I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman,” asserted Virginia Woolf.⁴⁴ In the interests of balance in this anthology, it would be heartening to think so. The very feminine eighth-century “Donal Og” would seem to back this up. But in any case, the Church was, from medieval times on, a place where women could give poetic voice to their feelings and insights (not without risk; how much more quickly they were burnt at the stake for a fresh take on things would be for a historian to assess). The beguines Hadewijch and Mechthild of Magdeburg are evidence of enormous female poetic innovation and daring. By the Reformation, things were getting quieter for women. Poetry has been, historically, associated with authority. Its forms and allusions often required a classical education. Yet even as women became more generally educated, they tended to blossom (with notable exceptions) in the genre of the novel rather than poetry.

44. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1989), 49.

The arrival of Modernism in the twentieth century changed this. Traditional poetic forms were often seen as narrow and stale. Traditional language was perceived as a way of keeping women down—and out of literature. While some women used formal poetry energetically, free-verse poets like Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich actively sought to tear down the old structures and to write the female perspective with authority. Such women would never have been Catholic! The Church was seen as perhaps the greatest Western ally of patriarchal suppression. Plath, who became a kind of high priestess of women's poetry after her suicide, killed off the specter of her own dead father in "Daddy" and ushered in an age not just of fatherlessness but Fatherlessness, for women who wanted full control over their minds and bodies. In the force of the first, second, and third feminist waves, the very essence of what it means to be a woman has been chewed over, subverted, redefined—and in the recent surge of gender theory, almost destroyed. It is perhaps only in the twenty-first century that Catholic women poets are fully understanding the freedom given to them by *having* a Father, and seeing that the Church, far from working against them, could potentially be their greatest defender.

Powerful women poets who kept the faith—like Edith Sitwell, Denise Levertov, and Elizabeth Jennings—have been, sadly, rarer than they should have been. My prediction for the twenty-first century is that we will see more greats of their kind "break[ing] / through earth and stone of the faithless world," to use Levertov's words, and from corners of the world less represented in this anthology.⁴⁵

45. Denise Levertov, "Ikon: The Harrowing of Hell." See page 425.

In conclusion, and in handing the reader over to voices from across the millennia, I can only say that collecting these poems has been a kind of dream. Any misgiving anyone may harbor for the forceful shaping of those words *great Catholic poems* must melt in the face of what has emerged. For it is only when we cut that we see the true form of what we have been searching for. And she is beautiful: lyrical, sensual, didactic, historical, mystical, and epic. Every poem here has edified, enchanted, and sustained me, much as “Donal Og” did all those years ago. The process has convinced me even more that poetry is the sister of prayer, that it thins the veil between ourselves and God. I commend these poems to anyone seriously interested in beauty and our dance with the eternal.

A Word about Order and Poetic Terms

The poems are arranged in chronological order—though if poems were written or published very close together, I have on occasion arranged them thematically.

This anthology is aimed at those who want to know more about poetry but may feel bewildered by it, as well as those who read poetry regularly or write it and study it. On the whole, I'm of the belief that jargon can be unhelpful, but when I have used a literary term, I have mostly supplied an example from the poem or given an explanation. A simple glossary for relevant terms can also be found at the back of the book.

100 Great Catholic Poems

“The Magnificat”

(c. 85)

THE VIRGIN MARY, RECORDED BY LUKE

Our first poet is the Virgin Mary, the woman who magnifies God as any real poet tries to do, whether they are conscious of it or not. These verses of Luke 1:46–55 began as part of an oral tradition: the words were spoken spontaneously—or perhaps they were sung in an eruption of joy—when Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth with news of her miraculous pregnancy. Of course, there may be naysayers on this matter. There will be people who insist that this was a literary device of Luke’s, albeit a divinely inspired one: that he put the words into Mary’s mouth when he wrote his Gospel.

But it should not be hard to believe that these words came from Mary herself. We can imagine the excitement of any woman pregnant with her first child—the jubilation, the wonder, the fear, the love, the uncertainty. We might then *try* to imagine those feelings magnified in someone who knew that she had conceived the Messiah. She was pregnant with a nation’s hope. She was so steeped in love for God that joy must have overshadowed every emotion. Of course she sings!

So much poetry is contained in that verb of the first line: to proclaim or “to magnify.” It not only speaks of Mary’s desire to glorify the Lord; it implies that she is immaculate, lucid as a pane of glass. In her song, Mary is magnifying patterns and connections in history and the world around her. Her theme is God’s plan of salvation.

In these lines, we also hear Mary’s deep familiarity with Scripture. She would have known the language of the Psalms and the exultations of women such as Hannah before her (see 1 Sam. 2:1–10). The linguistic patterns and images of those Hebrew songs and Psalms would have come quickly to Mary’s tongue. The Magnificat is, in effect, Mary’s own psalm. It offers praise; it thanks God for his deeds and “reversals”: the poor being lifted up, the rich being taken down. She uses the parallelism typical of the Psalms: one idea expressed or developed in different ways over multiple lines. “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,” she sings, and on the heels of that thought, “my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” In the similarity of the lines’ structure, Mary offers a parallel between soul and spirit, magnification and rejoicing. She is bubbling over as a person does when she is in love and trying to find as many ways as possible to express the way she feels.

The images of God and Israel contained within this poem would have been second nature to Mary through her prayer life—the strong arm of the Almighty, Israel as his servant—even as she was physically forming the ultimate image of God in her womb. Everything she says echoes both backward (to Abraham and God’s promises to him) and forward (to their fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah). Mary, even more than Judith, who also sang (see Jth. 16:1–17), is a woman of unsurpassable instrumental importance—even necessity—for God’s plan. She is a woman stepping into a psalm and becoming the living proof of its truth. She is a woman on fire; she is inspired. How could the words belong to anyone but her?

“The Magnificat”

THE VIRGIN MARY, RECORDED BY LUKE

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.

“A Hymn to Christ the Savior”

(198)

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

The author of this poem was born less than a century after St. Luke recorded the Magnificat and as few as fifty years after St. John penned his Gospel. Clement of Alexandria was a convert who recognized the importance of Greek philosophy in Christianity, and he left us tomes of writing on the faith. His famous trilogy’s middle book, *Paedagogus* (“The Teacher” or “The Instructor”), is an almost inexhaustible disquisition on Christ as guide in our lives. Clement proceeds to advise us on matters such as eating, drinking, “how to conduct ourselves at feasts,” and even laughing and sleeping. At the end of his discourse in prose, Clement slides seamlessly into prayer. But even this was not enough. He had to write a poem.

The original Greek of these stanzas is wild and irregular. It *exclaims!* It jolts in short lines. This is a hymn and an explosion. It demonstrates that only poetry can give voice to the passion within us that will not die. As St. Augustine would later say, “Singing is for the one who loves.”¹

Writings about Christ (and his mother, as we will see later on) have to break the bounds of ordinary language. Everyday words cannot begin to describe or praise him. Clement does dwell on the more usual descriptions of Jesus that characterize his divinity: “Lord of all time and space,” “Word eternal,”

1. Augustine, *Sermons* 336.1; PL 38:1472.

“Fount of mercy.” But effective poems can never stop with this type of abstraction.

So the poet Clement plunges into a litany of metaphors for Christ as teacher, a list of visual images that we know from our lives and can therefore better understand. He draws from Scripture yet manages to be fresh and riotous. We are the “colts untamed” of the first line, and Christ is our bridle. We are the “unwandering birds,” and he is our wing navigating us through choppy air. The metaphors continue: Christ is our shepherd, our rudder; he is our husbandman, bit, and fisherman; and, of course, he is our King.

In the third section, we see a mother, the “bride of grace,” feeding her flock with the “milk of wisdom.” Isaiah 49 speaks of God as a breastfeeding mother, and this image is picked up enthusiastically by Catholic poets through the centuries. But these lines also might suggest to us the Virgin Mary, who is the Church and who has also been identified with Wisdom.

The first and last stanzas are all about imploring God that the faithful be brought together to sing a passionate doxology—words that praise God—making this a poem that teaches, petitions, exults, and soars. In this English translation, the impetus is charged by an urgent beat of two, three, or four stresses a line and a riot of rhyme.

“A Hymn to Christ the Savior”

Translated from the Greek by Dr. William L. Alexander

CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

I

Bridle of colts untamed,
 Over our wills presiding;
Wing of unwandering birds,
 Our flight securely guiding.
Rudder of youth unbending,
Firm against adverse shock;
Shepherd, with wisdom tending
 Lambs of the royal flock:
Thy simple children bring
In one, that they may sing
In solemn lays
 Their hymns of praise
With guileless lips to Christ their King.

II

King of saints, almighty Word
Of the Father highest Lord;
Wisdom's head and chief;
Assuagement of all grief;
Lord of all time and space,
Jesus, Savior of our race;
Shepherd, who dost us keep;
 Husbandman, who tillest,
Bit to restrain us, Rudder
 To guide us as Thou willest;
Of the all-holy flock celestial wing;
Fisher of men, whom Thou to life dost bring;

From evil sea of sin,
And from the billowy strife,
Gathering pure fishes in,
Caught with sweet bait of life:
Lead us, Shepherd of the sheep,
Reason-gifted, holy One;
King of youths, whom Thou dost keep,
So that they pollution shun:
Steps of Christ, celestial Way;
Word eternal, Age unending;
Life that never can decay;
Fount of mercy, virtue-sending;
Life august of those who raise
Unto God their hymn of praise,
Jesus Christ!

111

Nourished by the milk of heaven,
To our tender palates given;
Milk of wisdom from the breast
Of that bride of grace exprest;
By a dewy spirit filled
From fair Reason's breast distilled;
Let us sucklings join to raise
With pure lips our hymns of praise
As our grateful offering,
Clean and pure, to Christ our King.
Let us with hearts undefiled,
Celebrate the mighty Child.
We, Christ-born, the choir of peace;
We, the people of His love,
Let us sing, nor ever cease,
To the God of peace above.

“Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh” (Excerpt)

(Fourth century)

ST. EPHREM

The Eastern Catholic Church has always understood the importance of *wonder*: that essential awe that believers feel in the face of mystery. St. Ephrem’s poetry works with this wonder. It marvels, it praises, and, crucially, it defends truth. The best poets and theologians know that poetry and theology are blood relatives. And for this future Doctor of the Church, explanations of the faith flowered easily into poetic form.

Ephrem the Syrian was born close to the fiery cradle of Christianity. Christ’s word was alight and spreading. It had knocked Saul down to the ground and blinded him (see Acts 9:1–9); it made people refer to themselves for the first time as “Christian.” As heresies cropped up like ragweed, they threatened a true understanding of Christ’s two natures—both fully human and fully divine. Part of the way that Ephrem fought theological error like this was through poems that spoke the true nature of God’s mystery. These were then set to popular folk tunes so that people could effortlessly memorize them.

Reading his “Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh,” we sometimes hear echoes of Mary’s “Magnificat” (just as her words echoed the Old Testament). We’re confronted with the same subversive ideas: the rich becoming poor, the high becoming lowly. But this time we’re not talking about the fortunes of the populous, but about God himself! He is the rich

one entering the womb of his mother and coming out poor. He is the “clother” of everything and everyone, who comes out into the world “naked and bare.” These Old Testament ideas of reversal seem even more shocking when faced with this image of God as a vulnerable baby. Here we see, in image and metaphor, the core of the faith. The poem is disconcerting, and it’s meant to be.

Look at how the lines take the wind out of the heretics’ sails. The awe—the *wonder*—is embedded in the fact that Mary, a human being, carried God; she fed God; she gave God milk to drink. Just like Mary in her scriptural song, Ephrem uses parallelism in the phrases: they are repetitive in structure and meaning (“The Lord entered her . . . / The Word entered her”); they are easy to remember and internalize.

Further on, in the last stanza, Ephrem has Mary herself speak. She is a harp, waiting to be played. If something so great can become so small, if something so difficult can be made so easy, then her “little mouth,” too, she says in a further echo of the Magnificat, can magnify his glory.

As you read, imagine how these lines would sound to ears that deny Christ’s humanity or his divinity and Mary’s role as the Mother of God. Listen to the unique stillness of the first lines of the third stanza; it is like the quiet of the solitary cave where Ephrem lived. We can almost hear the Incarnation happening. This is poetry that penetrates and illuminates Scripture. It sings with wonder.

Note:

The language of the translation has been updated here, and line breaks created by the editor.

“Hymns on the Nativity of Christ in the Flesh” (Excerpt)

From the translation of the Armenian/Syriac by Rev. J.B. Morris
From Hymns VIII and X

S T. E P H R E M

Mary gained in You, O Lord, the honors of all married women.
She conceived You within her without marriage.
There was milk in her breasts, not after the way of nature.
You made the thirsty land, suddenly, a fountain of milk.

If she carried You, Your mighty look made her burden light.
If she fed You it was because You were hungry;
if she gave You drink it was because You were thirsty;
when she embraced You, You, the coal of mercies,
did willingly keep her bosom safe.

Your Mother is a wonder.
The Lord entered her, and became a servant:
the Word entered her, and became silent within her;
thunder entered her, and His voice was still:
the Shepherd of all entered her; He became a Lamb in her,
and came forth, bleating.

The belly of Your Mother changed the order of things,
O You that orders everything!
The rich went in, He came out poor.
The high One went in, He came out lowly.
Brightness went into her and clothed himself
and came out a despised form.

“HYMNS ON THE NATIVITY OF CHRIST
IN THE FLESH” (EXCERPT)

The Mighty went in and clad himself with fear from the belly.
He that gives food to all went in to know hunger.
He that gives drink to all went in to know thirst.
The clother of all came forth from her naked and bare.

.....

“And as the harp waits for its master,
my mouth waits for You. May the tongue of Your Mother
bring what pleases You;
and since I have learnt a new Conception by You,
let my mouth learn in You, O newborn Son,
a new song of praise.

And if hindrances are no hindrances to You
and since difficulties are easy to You
as a womb without marriage conceived You
and a belly without seed brought You forth
it is easy for a little mouth to multiply Your great glory!”

“Against the Burden of Sickness” (Excerpt)

(382–390)

ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

The fourth-century author of this poem was, in some ways, a very modern man. When we hear of the travails of the early Church Fathers, or the stories of the saints suffering exile, stoning, or worse, it can be easy to imagine them as heroic or coolly courageous. Gregory of Nazianzus gives a subtly different impression. He went through a lot, he felt it keenly, and he liked to tell about it—especially in verse.

After a stormy sea crossing to Athens, Gregory had a dramatic conversion to the faith and went on to become a brilliant theologian and bishop. But there’s no doubt that Gregory, like so many of the early theologians, had a poet’s soul. He was certainly prolific in his poetry, writing thousands of lines in Greek. His title, “the Theologian,” was given to him because he taught the truths of the faith through his verse (a *theologos* literally means “one who speaks God’s word”).

The poem below (which is taken from a longer sequence) lets us taste Gregory’s complex rhetorical style in modern language—and to witness what, in some ways, would have been new frontiers in poetry. Gregory was one of the first Christian autobiographical poets. As moderns, we have become very used to poets baring their own lives—their illnesses, depressions, or loves—in their poems. It is easy to assume that this is new. But,

“AGAINST THE BURDEN OF SICKNESS”
(EXCERPT)

in fact, Gregory was doing this just three hundred years after Christ.

As both a sensitive man who needed solitude but also had a desire to teach and a holy man who was very reluctant to take holy orders, Gregory cheerfully admitted to referring everything to himself. But rather than his poetry being self-absorbed, Gregory never failed to make Christ the touchstone and interpreter of his troubles and victories. In other words, through poetry, he elevated his own earthbound story of prevarication and suffering to something that was a part of the epic history of salvation.

In this poem, we are treated to the rare sound of a saint and future Doctor of the Church complaining. Gregory is also scared. Has Christ abandoned him? When Gregory was ill, he could not preach and take care of his flock—and what pain this caused! The image of his people as a baby attempting to feed from a dry breast is riveting. His longing to preach and to compose sermons is palpable. Later in the poem, he confronts the devil head on, then implores Christ to rescue him, casting himself as a character in Scripture, like Lazarus or the paralytic. The way that he laments and then practically commands Christ to help him is both disarmingly fresh and very ancient. Angst like this is easily found in the Psalms, and Gregory’s depressive downs are matched by similarly Psalm-like praise that has wings. It is reassuring and touching to see that even the holiest can rave. The whole range of human emotion, Gregory seems to say, is fit for God to hear.

“Against the Burden of Sickness” (Excerpt)

Excerpted and adapted by the editor from a translation
from the Greek by Suzanne Abrams Rebillard

ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS

I groan because I seem forgotten
by the quickening eye of glorious Christ.
He cared for me so much, honored me,
even in the womb of my pure mother;
he pulled me from sufferings and icy seas.

I groan because I've dropped the reins—
I'm with the people, but they can't be with me.
I fed them sermons with the triple-
light that issued from my tongue, but now,
as a weaning babe in his mother's arms

pulls on a dry nipple with his thirsting lips,
so also from my tongue the people languish. . . .

.....

Mold covers my books, my homilies are left
unwritten, and who will have the charity
to finish them? Everything has perished

while I live, and existence for me is feeble,
weaker than a ship cut loose from moorings.

But even if you drag me, demon of deep groans,
never will my heart bend to you; rather,
preserved, I will sink into mother-earth.

“AGAINST THE BURDEN OF SICKNESS”
(EXCERPT)

Let the worm have me as the serpent's price.

You can take my skin; my soul remains intact.
What's stamped inside, God's image, I will hand to Christ,
you slayer of men, you, who were beaten
even before you bound great Job, since through

his troubles God crowned him with a holy victory
and doubled what you shattered. Such is the way
of gentle Christ. But Lord, now command
that I be left unharmed; your word is my cure.

I am a new Lazarus among the dead; but shout,

“Rise!” and let this corpse reanimate. Bedridden,

I am a new paralytic, but shout, “You are of solid limb!”
and I will rise, lifting my bed high. I steal a cure
with my own hands from your tasseled hem.
Swiftly check the flow of blood from my wasted flesh.

“Splendor Paternae Gloriam”

(Fourth century)

ST. AMBROSE

In how many Masses have the words “Light from Light” been spoken to illustrate the consubstantial relationship between God the Father and his Son? It is one of the most penetrating and illuminating poetic images ever penned. And yet, the human mind being what it is, even these words can become dulled by familiarity. In this poem, which uses those very words, we have a modern translation of an ancient morning hymn, and it unspools the creedal image “Light from Light” as it turns to Christ as light, asking for him to pour, in turn, upon us as we contemplate the difficulties of the day to come.

The image of Christ as Light from Light, which St. Ambrose draws on to such effect in the first two stanzas of this poem, was vitally important to emphasize in the fourth century. This Milanese priest became bishop in the swell of the heresy of Arianism, which denied precisely that relationship between Father and Son. Ambrose’s poetry, like Ephrem’s, was meant to quash theological error—but also to do what only poetry can do: to brand indelible images onto the mind and heart. Like Ephrem’s hymns, Ambrose’s poem was set to music to make it even more memorable.

In the twentieth century, the convert Thomas Merton deliberately took away the element of song in this translation. Merton’s modern style involves using freer structures, working

against old forms and jolting readers into *seeing* images to which they may have become inured.

The result is a muscular poem of praise and petition to the Trinity. The first stanza is fairly metrically regular and full of delicious repetition (light/Light), just like the original—a dance of sounds and ideas. And then in the second stanza, Merton breaks his lines and brings us up short on purpose. Be aware that the last word of a line is often the most important; it has its own significance. Merton wants us to linger on “Sun.” He wants us to register its double meaning (Sun/Son).

The Spirit should pour into our senses, says Ambrose, and Merton keeps this as a short line—“Flood our souls!”—so we have the space to soak that sensation up. Our blood, says Merton, should not be “chilled” by any betrayal of Truth—sticking closely to the sense of what Ambrose first wrote (“*fraudis venena nesciat*”) but adding “chill” and “blood” to charge the words with physicality. “Blunt the teeth that hate our life”: Merton’s word choices could come from the Psalms; they demand as much as petition.

There is so much poetic and theological intertwining of ideas here that it can be hard to let every point soak in. The writer/petitioner sees his inner life reflected in the changing light of day: dawn as a clean conscience, noon as intense faith, and dusk as a challenge to spiritual clarity. The day also represents the consubstantial nature of the Father and the Son, and their outpouring in the Spirit.

In Merton’s hands, this famous piece no longer has the feel of a musical hymn. It has recovered some of the freshness that it had when it was first scratched onto Ambrose’s page. The short words and lines, and no less revolutionary images, shine.

“Splendor Paternae Gloriam”

Translated from the Latin by Thomas Merton

S T . A M B R O S E

Thou splendor of the Father’s glory,
Pouring upon us light drawn from Thy Light:
Thou art the Light of lights, the fount of brightness
And to our days the daylight-giving Day.

O Thou true Sun,
Shine down in everlasting glory,
And with the radiance of Thy Spirit
Flood our souls!

Cry we, then, in our prayers, to the Father,
Father of glory everlasting, and of mighty grace
To save us from the treachery of sin:

Confirm our souls in works of strength
And blunt the teeth that hate our life,
And contradict our evils into blessings
Giving us grace to do His will.

Govern our spirits, rule them Father!
Build in our chaste and unrebelling bodies
Fires of faith!
Nor let the poison of betrayal chill our blood.

And may Thy Christ our life-bread be,
His faith our drink:
Then slake we our glad spirits
Wisdom’s mighty wine.

So may this day go by in joy,
And may our cleanness be like its clean dawn
Our faith like the high noon:
But let no evening shroud our minds in dusk.

But now the dawn begins to show:
O may true Day soon shine full upon us:
The Day which is the Father in the Son,
The Son in Him, His Word, entire.

And so, to God the Father, glory,
And to His only Son,
Together with the Spirit, the Paraclete,
Now and forever and ever.

Amen.

“Late Have I Loved Thee” from the *Confessions*

(c. 400)

ST. AUGUSTINE

Most people, religious or not, will at some point hear the words “Late have I loved thee.” They were written by St. Augustine as part of his conversion story at the beginning of the fifth century in North Africa. Despite having a Christian mother (St. Monica), Augustine became a Manichean—a religious sect that saw the world as split between the goodness of spirit and the evil of matter. It took a penetrating experience of God to heal that worldview. We are fortunate in having these lines, which capture that experience. Though technically presented as prose, they are written in such wrought and exalted Latin that they defy and transcend the genre.¹ Even in translation, these lines have permeated the consciousness of humanity, crossing cultures and time. They do what only poetry can do: they compress an event full of philosophical, theological, and emotional ramifications into few words.

The structure of the first phrase, “Late have I loved thee,” impresses itself on the mind: the stress falls on “late” and “loved,” and those two words are also bound by the alliterative *l*. “Late” as the first word ushers in regret and longing—a sense of urgency. “Loved” then ushers in fulfillment and joy—a sense of peace. These same words are quickly repeated because the author’s praise and love transports the lines from the simple

1. Line breaks added by the editor.

communicative act of prose; they make their own music. The acoustic repetitions are hypnotic: “late,” “love,” “I outside,” “I sought thee outside.” And the opposing concepts of the first two stanzas (“so ancient, so new”; “within me,” “outside”) swing the reader’s emotions with the intensity of Augustine’s own crashing, soaring epiphany as he recognizes that God is as loveable, and therefore as knowable, as all the things that he had been chasing in the world.

For despite love affairs and success in literary endeavors, despite friends and pleasures, the author of these lines experienced a certain restlessness. In his autobiography, Augustine recounts stealing a sack-load of pears from a tree as a teenager—not because the fruit was truly tempting but for the vivifying thrill of transgression. Even then, perhaps unconsciously, he was pulling at God’s sleeve. But God waited until exactly the right moment to fill him with his presence.

These lines illustrate not only the beauty of the faith and the substance of our relationship with the divine, but also the essence of poetry itself—because God reaches us in the way of poetry. The bored boy who stole the pears had been deaf and blind to God. He had not noticed God’s fragrance, nor tasted God, nor felt God touch him. But these lines chart the breaking open of every sense by God and to God, almost as if God were a ripe summer fruit. The former Manichean is understanding that God (despite being invisible) is both within the world and within himself, and that God can be known through love, in a tangible way. Like the blind man of Scripture, Augustine’s sight is given to him. He also hears for the first time. God’s breath, like Christ’s breath on the Apostles, is in his mouth like the kiss of life. The touch of God has ignited his soul. Like great poetry, God, Augustine discovers, enters every sense.

Yet there is no complacency nor satisfaction here. The word “late” resounds like a deep bell throughout. He is left thirsting, panting. The poem is dynamic—the hunger, for Augustine, has only just begun, as for a man who smells food after a long fast and quickens his step.

“Late Have I Loved Thee”

Translated from the Latin by Francis J. Sheed

ST. AUGUSTINE

Late have I loved Thee,
O Beauty so ancient and so new;
late have I loved Thee!

For behold Thou were within me,
and I outside;
and I sought Thee outside

and in my unloveliness
fell upon those lovely things
that Thou hast made.

Thou were with me
and I was not with Thee.
I was kept from Thee by those things,

yet had they not been in Thee,
they would not have been at all.
Thou didst call and cry to me

and break open my deafness:
and Thou didst send forth
Thy beams and shine upon me

and chase away my blindness:
Thou didst breathe fragrance upon me,
and I drew in my breath

and do pant for Thee:
I tasted Thee, and now hunger
and thirst for Thee:

Thou didst touch me,
and I have burned for Thy peace.

“The Deer’s Cry” (St. Patrick’s Breastplate)

(Fifth century / eighth century)

S T . P A T R I C K

Here is a poem that is also a prayer. Yet here is a prayer that, in its music and heightened language, is certainly a poem. And, as a poem, it has often been made into song. Attributed to St. Patrick, the fifth-century evangelizer of Ireland, it is thought to have been written in the eighth century. Both timelines are likely.

The story has it that, during his mission in Ireland, Patrick was journeying with fellow evangelists, aware of druids lying in wait to attack them along the road. As they walked, Patrick prayed this *lorica*, which means both “breastplate” and “prayer for protection.” Legend maintains that as they passed the hidden druids, Patrick and his men appeared as a doe with her fawns and so were left unharmed. That is why the piece is known as “The Deer’s Cry.”

The poem is made up of plenty of repetition at the start of lines, which would work well to the beat of a long march down life’s dark, unpredictable roads. The repetition also makes the piece easy to memorize: no doubt it was handed down orally until the point when it was more formally recorded—hence the two dates of composition.

In its initial pronouncement, the poem has the sound of a creedal declaration. It states, in its first four beefy lines, the essence of what Patrick would have been declaring to the

Irish: the existence of God who is three yet one. The rhyme of “threeness” with “oneness” and assonance of “Creator” and “Creation” hits us with the punch of truth. The words also let us know that this God, who is the Author of everything, is somehow infused into us. We rise stronger with him, as though he is the very marrow and sap of our bones.

Patrick then goes on, with hypnotic litany, to personally identify with the mysteries of Christ: how his baptism, burial, descent, and ascension are fused into us with the morning light. The lists come thick and fast: of the Communion of Saints, of the natural world—at which point the lines become what we might call Franciscan, although St. Francis himself was still some centuries off—of risks and perils, and of every which way that God can protect and guide us.

An author who certainly inspired Patrick was St. Paul, who wrote the first “Breastplate” in his Letter to the Ephesians: “Put on the whole armor of God” (Eph. 6:11). In all Patrick’s inventories of heights and depths, there is a Pauline ring: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come . . .” (Rom. 8:38). No stone of danger is left uncovered by this prayer-poem. It is a summoning of all the supernatural host. It is a fabulous example of how articulation of both fear and belief strengthens us: it is, in action, Paul’s exhortation that we call on the name of Jesus (Rom. 10:13).

Patrick’s famous “Christ with me, Christ before me” are lines that demonstrate poetry’s role in clothing the invisible. Speak his name, Patrick says; locate him in every place. Recital of this piece is palpably fortifying. By naming and petitioning in such language, we are empowered in God.

“The Deer’s Cry” (St. Patrick’s Breastplate)

Translated from the Irish by Whitley Stokes,
John Strachan, and Kuno Meyer

ST. PATRICK

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
Through confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.

I arise today
Through the strength of Christ’s birth with His baptism,
Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,
Through the strength of His resurrection and His ascension,
Through the strength of His descent for the Judgement
of Doom.

I arise today
Through the strength of the love of Cherubim,
In obedience of angels,
In the service of archangels,
In hope of resurrection to meet with reward,
In prayers of patriarchs,
In predictions of prophets,
In preachings of apostles,
In faiths of confessors,
In innocence of holy virgins,
In deeds of righteous men.

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun,
Radiance of moon,
Splendour of fire,
Speed of lightning,
Swiftiness of wind,
Depth of sea,
Stability of earth,
Firmness of rock.

I arise today
Through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me,
God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me,
God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me,
God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me,
God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me
From snares of devils,
From temptations of vices,
From everyone who shall wish me ill,
Afar and anear,
Alone and in multitude.

I summon today all these powers between me and those evils,
Against every cruel and merciless power that may oppose
 my body and soul,
Against incantations of false prophets,
Against black laws of pagandom,
Against false laws of heretics,
Against craft of idolatry,
Against spells of women and smiths and wizards,
Against every knowledge that corrupts man’s body and soul.

Christ to shield me today
Against poison, against burning,
Against drowning, against wounding,
So that there may come to me abundance of reward.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,
 Christ when I arise.
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.

I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness,
Through confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.