

Interlude: Discendi Amor Santo/ Come Down O Love Divine

The multi-lingual multi-ethnic transgenerational boundary-crossing character of the church universal, and of European Christendom within it, is beautifully expressed in the story of this hymn that is, today, commonly used in worship by many English-speaking Christians and was sung during the service of baptism of Princess Charlotte.

To summarise the results of a preliminary google trawl (and, yet again, I must admit, wikipedia has had its uses): the English text of the hymn – done in the 19th century by an Anglo-Irish High Anglican clergyman, Dublin-born Richard F Littledale (1833-1890) – is a paraphrase of portions (not the whole, so far as I can judge) of a 15th century Italian poem by an Italian Catholic, Bianco da Siena (d. 1434), “Discendi Amor Santo”, “Come down (O) Holy Love”, which itself seems to be based in part on a Latin hymn, the so-called “Golden Sequence”, “Veni sancte Spiritus” (“Come Holy Spirit”), the authorship of which is variously attributed to, among others, Pope Innocent III, and Stephen Langton Archbishop of Canterbury (d 1228).

So here already one is moving between Latin, Italian and English, between Italy and then, in Littledale’s life and career, Ireland and England, and across even the boundary between Catholic and Protestant expressions of faith (despite Littledale’s having written in his lifetime many critiques of Catholicism); besides travelling across time, from the 13th century to the 15th century to the 19th century. And then, finally, in the early 20th century, along came English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) and liked Littledale’s poem so much that he composed a musical setting

especially for it, naming that setting “Down Ampney” after his own birthplace in the Cotswolds of Gloucestershire. The combination – Come Down O Love Divine, with the tune Down Ampney – first appeared in print in the “English Hymnal” of 1906.

See some discussion of the hymn, here (by an author identified as a professor of sacred music):

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-italian-mystic-composes-melodic-o-love-divine>

A potted biography of Bianco da Siena, here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bianco_da_Siena

A potted biography of Littledale, here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Frederick_Littledale

Ralph Vaughan Williams, here:

http://www.rvwsociety.com/bio_expanded.html

And here – again, thanks to the internet – are the lyrics of, first, the Veni Sancte Spiritus, then of Discendi Amor Santo; and finally, this time from a hymn-book on my own bookshelf, the words of Come Down O Love Divine. Just a few of the many – and ever-multiplying – songs and tongues of Christendom, of the faith that ex-Muslim now-Christian Lamin Sanneh, of west Africa, described as a “translated message” (contrasting it, quite explicitly, with the imperial and obsessive Arabocentrism of Islam).

From wikipedia, the Latin (there is a literal English translation at the link, and some discussion of various musical settings of the Latin text):

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veni_Sancte_Spiritus

VENI, SANCTE SPIRITUS

“Veni, Sancte Spiritus,
et emitte caelitus
lucis tuae radium.

Veni, pater pauperum,
veni, dator munerum,
veni, lumen cordium
Consolator optime,
dulcis hospes animae,
dulce refrigerium.

In labore requies,
in aestu temperies,
in fletu solatium.

O lux beatissima,
reple cordis intima
tuorum fidelium.

Sine tuo numine,
nihil est in homine,
nihil est innoxium.

Lava quod est sordidum,
riga quod est aridum,
sana quod est saucium.

Flecte quod est rigidum,

fove quod est frigidum,

rege quod est devium.

Da tuis fidelibus,

in te confidentibus,

sacrum septenarium.

Da virtutis meritum,

da salutis exitum,

da perenne gaudium.”

Now the Italian, from this link:

<http://chantblog.blogspot.com.au/2012/05/discendi-amor-santo.html>

DISCENDI, AMOR SANTO

“Discendi, amor santo,

Visita la mie mente

Del tuo amore ardente,

Si che di te m’infiammi tutto quanto.

2/

Vienne, consolatore,

Nel mio cuor veramente:

Del tuo ardente amore

Arde veracemente:

Del tuo amor cocente

Si forte sie ferito:

Vada come smarrito

Dentro e di fuore ardendo tutto quanto.

3/

Arda sì fortemente

Che tutto mi consume,

Si che veracemente

Lassi mondan costumi:

Li splendenti lumi

Lucenti, illuminanti

Mi stien sempre davanti,

Per li quali mi vesta il vero manto.

4/

E 'l manto chi' i' mi vesta

Sie la carità santa:

Sott' una bigia vesta

Umilità si canta,

La qual mai non si vanta

Per se nullo ben fare,

Non si sa inalzare,

Ma nel profondo scende con gran pianto.

5/ Nel fondo più profondo

Discende nel suo cuore:
Di ciascun uom del mondo
Sè ved' esser minore:
Non si cura d' onore,
Ma le vergogne brama:
Di se vendetta chiama,
Odia se stesso sempre in ogni canto.

6/

Se dagli altri è inalzato
Nel cuor sempre discende,
Del ben che 'gli ha, ingrato
Sè esser sempre intende.
Chi tale stato prende
Già ma' non può perire:
Vita si gli è 'l morire,
Morendo vive e vivend' è poi santo.

7/

In queste duo colonne
Si ferman gli amaderi,
Perchè sôn le madonne
Sopra l' altre migliori:
Chi ben c'è ferm', ardori

Sì grandi sente al cuore,
Che grida per amore,
Che sostener nol può, si è tamanto.

8/

Sì grande è quel disio
Ch' allor l' anima sente,
Che dir nol sapre' io,
A ciò non son potente:
Nulla umana mente
Entender nol potria,
Se nol gustasse pria
Per la virtù dello Spirito Santo.
Deo gratias. Amen."

"COME DOWN, O LOVE DIVINE"

"Come down O Love divine
Seek Thou this soul of mine
And visit it with Thine own ardour glowing
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.
There let it freely burn

Till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming,
And let Thy glorious light
Shine ever on my sight
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.
Let holy charity
Mine outward vesture be
And lowliness become mine inner clothing;
True lowliness of heart
That takes the humbler part
And o'er its own shortcomings weeps with loathing.
And so the yearning strong
With which the soul will long
Will far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace
Till he become the place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling."