



## From Deacon Mark Miller's Desk

**We're inching closer** to the celebration of Christ's birth. This year, the Vatican entered the spirit of the season early with its "Christmas Contest". The contest invites young people to create new Christmas carols. In his address to the organizers and participants, Pope Francis recalled the words of Pope St. Paul VI who, when addressing a group of performing artists in 1965, said that "*This world in which we live needs beauty so as not to fall into despair.*"

**It's hard to think** that there would have been a time when the words "Christmas" and "despair" would have been used in the same sentence let alone the same breath, yet that was indeed the situation in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century England. Oliver Cromwell, who would rule the British Isles from 1653 until his death in 1658, joined the Puritans in 1628. They were a major influence in his ascent through the military and the politics of his day. Music historian Rosie Pentreath explains that he supported the Puritan view that it was "very frivolous and sort of foolish to combine Christianity and a belief in God and Jesus with frivolous feasting of winter." Cromwell tried his best to outlaw the singing of Christmas carols. This somber state of affairs would continue until 1840 when Queen Victoria married Prince Albert of Germany. Together, they introduced German Yuletide celebrations and revived English traditions.

**The Victorians certainly** did not invent singing at Christmas time—that began as early as 129 A.D. when the bishop of Rome encouraged the singing – but only by Bishops! -- the Angel's Hymn [we know it today as *Gloria in Excelsis*]. Nor did the Victorians invent caroling – groups of singers who performed from street corners or visited people's homes; that practice began in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and continued through the 15<sup>th</sup> – originally as part of the winter solstice celebrations.

**Bringing Christmas "back"** was no easy task, even for the Queen of England! Maggi Van Dorn, writing for America magazine, explained that one notable composer and Anglican clergyman, John Mason Neale, was repeatedly harassed for his retrieval of the dangerously Catholic classics (including "O Come O Come Emmanuel") and was even mauled at the funeral of a religious sister. Even then, religious aesthetics (like whether to sing in Latin or decorate a Christmas tree) were no private matter. They carried a host of political and religious implications.

**By the 19<sup>th</sup> century**, Christmas – as we know it today – was back on the map. Some of our best known Christmas hymns found life at this time; songs such as: "Silent Night," "O Come O Come Emmanuel," "Good King Wenceslas," "It Came Upon a Midnight

Clear," "We Three Kings of Orient Are," "O Christmas Tree," "Go Tell It On the Mountain," "O Holy Night," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Away in a Manger," and "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

**We also owe** a debt of gratitude for the tradition of singing carols to a group of workers with the unusual title of "the waits". In 1300s England, the men who "waited" for the sun to rise before they could go home [what we call "nightwatchmen" today] would often spend their time singing – to themselves, their coworkers, or travelers approaching the city gates. At Christmas time, they changed from the usual drinking songs to the more appropriate seasonal carols.

**Meanwhile, in Italy**, new Christmas traditions were being born. Everyone's favorite permanent deacon, St. Francis of Assisi wanted to create Christmas activities that could be understood by even the simplest shepherd and appreciated by the land barons as well. His first step was to translate the Latin hymns into Italian. Armed with these new translations [and a couple of his own], he set Christmas Eve, 1223, as the debut for a new kind of Christmas worship. Armed with the Pope's permission, he substituted these Christmas hymns for the usual sacred music at the midnight Mass in Greccio, Italy. He wasn't satisfied with simply providing some new, easily sung, music. He wanted the people to enter into the worship; to have a real appreciation for the magnitude of God's gift of His Son.

**To accomplish this**, he took his cue from the Gospel stories, recreating the events of 4 BC in 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy. The people helping him created a manger where the Christ Child would lay but used [what was then] a modern manger [the one we're familiar with] instead of a stone slab that was in common use at 4 BC. He set his presentation in a barn while the reality would have most likely have been a cave. The Bible mentions only an ox and a donkey; St. Francis added animals common to the parish boundaries. While not historically accurate [there wouldn't have been any sheep in the barn] the people responded enthusiastically. Seeing the story of Christ's birth played out in their own language, common sounds woven into the story, and natural elements like common farm animals touched people's hearts. What had been an abstract story simply read to them became a real event. People, animals, even the smells all combined to explain the story of Christmas in a new way. The following year, more parishes in the region created their own Christmas pageants. Francis' hope for a meaningful, Christ-centered Christmas activity weathered time, political and economic storms and, together with Christmas carols, remain a mainstay of holiday traditions.