

Silent Night

This beautiful devotional Catholic Christmas hymn was written by Fr. Joseph Mohr, a Catholic priest of the parish of St. Nicholas, in the small village of Oberndorf, Austria, for Mid-night Mass, December 24, 1818. The inspiration for the lyrics of this hymn is shrouded in several charming stories that have been passed down over the years. One such story places Fr. Mohr on an emergency call late one night to take the last rites to a dying member of his parish who lived high up beyond the village limits.

On the way home from his sad mission, he looked down upon the candle lights beaming from the windows in the homes nestled in the village and then turned his gaze upward the starry heavens gleaming above the mountains. The wind which normally is restless in its shifting among the mountain tops was quite still. Soon his thoughts took him to the coming Advent and a sacred vision entered his mind that the Christ Child must have been born in Bethlehem on such a night. He saw the shepherds watching their flocks by night and the angels singing Gloria in Excelsis echoing above the valley floor. Being extremely late at night, he hurried home and to his study and with a feathered quill sat at his desk to write the message of “Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.”

In the early morning hours, he set out with his manuscript in hand to show it to the old church organist Franz Gruber. Upon reading the words and in what must have been a divinely inspired moment, a melody flooded his mind and began to softly sing the words to his wife and Fr. Mohr. Over time the hymn became known to all the people in the village and by 1831 was sung by the Strasser sisters at the Leipzig Fair. From there its popularity continued to grow. What a charming story indeed!

Reflection

In my research I discovered that there have been at least 7 different translations. In 1858, the hymn was translated into English by hymn writer Emily Elizabeth Steele Elliot (1836-1897), and privately printed for St. Mark's Church, Brighton. This is translation, *Stilly Night, Holy Night! Silent stars shed their light*, appeared in only a few European publications. The hymn was popularized in the United States by the Renner family of singers touring America in 1827. The first printed edition in the United States was around 1840 but was not widely distributed. A second translation was done by Episcopal priest John Freeman Young (1820-1885). His translation appeared in his *Carols for Christmas*, 1859. This translation has become the common text for the hymn today, *Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright*, and is sometimes referred to as the Protestant version. It did not appear in Catholic hymnals until the mid-1950s.

In the United States, the hymns first appearance in Catholic hymnals was in the *Laudis Corona*, 1880 and a translation, *Silent Night, sacred night, Bethlehem sleeps, yet what light*, by an unknown author is considered the Catholic version. The *St. Gregory Hymnal*, 1920 substituted *holy night* for *sacred night* otherwise the lyrics remain virtually the same. The Catholic version of Silent Night continued to appear in hymnals until the mid-1950's. To learn more about the various translations of this Christmas hymn visit *The Hymns and Carols for Christmas* website.

For my collection, I decided to use the verses found in the *Laudis Corona* hymnal and a harmonization by Sr. John Stainer (1840-1901). These verses will seem foreign, but they were for nearly a century in the hearts and mind of Catholics during the Christmas tide. When I sang with St. Mary's choir, this hymn was not only sung on Christmas Eve but also for Christmas Day.

SILENT NIGHT.

(21.)

p *Moderato.* *pp* *mf* *p* *cres.*

1. Si - lent night, sa - cred night, Bethlehem sleeps, yet what light Floats a-round the ho - ly Pair:

Songs of an - gels fill the air, Strains of heav-en-ly peace, Strains of hea-ven-ly peace.

2 Silent night, sacred night,
 Shepherds first see the light,
 Hear the Alleluias ring,
 Which the angel-chorus sing;
 Christ the Saviour has come,
 Christ the Saviour has come.

3 Silent night, sacred night,
 Son of God! oh, what light
 Radiates from thy manger-bed
 Over realms with darkness spread,
 Thou in Bethlehem born,
 Thou in Bethlehem born.