

*The*  
*Church Year*  
*in*  
*Limericks*

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*To Portia, who heard most of them first.*

# *Introduction*

*Sing to the Lord a new song.*

—Psalm 48

*Praise the Lord from the earth, ye dragons and all deeps.*

—Psalm 148

*All God's critters got a place in the choir.*

—Bill Staines

*The Church Year in Limericks* might seem like a contradiction in terms, or a work whose existence is confined to a brief mention in the wonderfully ridiculous *Van Rooten's Book of Improbable Saints*. But if the psalms encourage new forms of praise from all of creation (including sea monsters, cows, and fruit trees, according to Psalm 148), why not make room for liturgical wit? God certainly has a sense of humor, and so should we.

Christian limericks have a longer history than you might expect, with Thomas Aquinas himself serving as the patron saint of the genre. In addition to his great theological treatises (among them the *Summa Theologiae*), he is the author of many prayers for liturgical use. It was first pointed out in the April 30, 1910 issue of *The Tablet* that one of those prayers, though originally written as prose and intended for recitation after Communion, contains what can justifiably be called the first Christian limerick ever written:

Sit vitiorum meorum evacuatio  
Concupiscentiae et libidinis exterminatio,  
Caritatis et patientiae,  
Humilitatis et obedientiae,  
Omniumque virtutum augmentatio.

Admittedly, the rhythm is looser than one might hope for in a limerick, but the rhyme scheme and the shape of the thought are all perfectly acceptable. If Aquinas had written his prayer in English, it might have come out like this:

May God's feast leave my vices depressed;  
May it quench the desires in my breast;  
    May my virtues gain clarity:  
    Humbleness, charity,  
Patience, and all of the rest.

The next writer to connect Christianity and limericks is Patrick Brontë, the father of the more famous authors Emily, Charlotte, and Anne. Patrick's own unusual contribution to the genre rests on "The Cottage Maid," part of his *Cottage Poems* (1811). The entire collection is unremarkable for its straightforward, even banal, piety, but what sets "The Cottage Maid" apart from the sentimental Christian verse of its time is that each of its 24 stanzas has the perfect shape of a limerick—five lines in a triple-beat rhythm—but with one crucial and horrible difference: *the last line never rhymes*. Try reading even two stanzas out loud:

To novels and plays not inclined,  
Nor aught that can sully her mind;  
    Temptations may shower,—  
    Unmoved as a tower,  
She quenches the fiery arrows.

She dresses as plain as the lily  
That modestly glows in the valley,  
    And never will go  
    To play, dance or show—  
She calls them the engines of Satan.

And so on. One would very much like to know why Brontë so steadfastly refused to satisfy his readers with the rhyme that they surely desired, but refuse them he did.

An equally novel but much more successful use for the form is found in Richard Kieckhefer's *There Once Was a Serpent: A History of Theology in Limericks* (2010). Kieckhefer offers a history of Christian theology from Irenaeus to Tillich, with 74 limericks scattered throughout his account—and he claims, tongue in cheek, to have discovered the supposedly anonymous limericks tucked inside an old book, but his verses need no apology; their quality matches the clarity of his theological history.

*The Church Year in Limericks* is the result of my desire to start choir rehearsals in a new way. Some choir directors simply launch in, others start with an announcement or a short prayer; I wanted to find something that would engage the choir's attention, provide a comment on the day's music or the week's activities, and set a creative challenge for myself. I had already spent years writing limericks for other occasions—birthdays, contests, lecture introductions, commissions—and I saw no reason not to apply them to this new opportunity as well. And with very few exceptions I have kept up the tradition, starting every Wednesday evening and Sunday morning rehearsal with a limerick. Those rehearsals also help to explain why this collection contains so many limericks devoted to choral topics. Over the years, many of the limericks have been used more than once, and happily too; if Bach could recycle his own works, surely limericks can be repeated as well. And many of the limericks from the last decade or so do not show up in this collection, since many of them were written for particular individuals, church events, or local happenings: good poems at the time, but their relevance has passed.

Like an Advent calendar or a box of chocolates, *The Church Year in Limericks* is not meant to be enjoyed all at once. Each stanza exists on its own, and reading the entire collection straight through diminishes the individuality of its separate parts. Think of this book instead as a sort of hymnal, in which all the hymns happen to be written in the same meter but each one serves a different purpose in worship: contemplation, inspiration, insight, comfort, joy. Yes, there is perhaps a higher quotient of lively word play here than in a regular hymnal, but that's all the more reason to appreciate each limerick for itself.

Limericks also ought to be appreciated out loud. It's true, as Paul tells us, that we don't always know how to pray as we ought, and God's spirit intercedes for us, with sighs too deep for words. In the beginning, on the other hand, was the word, and even if that word wasn't originally spoken in a format of five rhyming lines, I'd like to think that the good news of Pentecost means that God can be praised with limericks as well.

So take each limerick on its own, try it out loud, and share it with your friends, your fellow choir members or churchgoers, or anyone who might enjoy a new perspective on an old tradition. I'll conclude, just like Psalm 19, with an expression of literary hope:

Let the words of my rhythmic oration  
And the fruit of my heart's meditation  
    Become part of your flock,  
    O Jehovah, our rock  
And redeemer and source of salvation.



# *Prologue*

### **Parental Approval**

“The limerick’s stature is slight,”  
Intoned God, “yet it’s dear to my sight.  
    Though the world’s none the worse  
    For much heavier verse,  
I *did* declare LET THERE BE LIGHT.”

### **Piety and Poetry**

Said Jesus, that rhyme-loving guy,  
“Limericks rule, as do I:  
    We seem humble, of course,  
    Yet we’re filled with a force  
That only the damned can deny.”

### **Matthew 13: The Poetic Parable**

The thing that my poetry needs  
Is Christ’s tale of the man who sows seeds,  
    And I pray that each syllable  
    Falls onto tillable  
Ground, far away from the weeds.

*Advent*

### **The Physical Challenges**

To be pregnant's a pain in the rump.  
Is Mary still pleased to be plump?  
    And has Jesse admired  
    The labor required  
To bring forth a shoot from his stump?

### **Biological vs. Ecclesiastical Time**

An angel caused Mary to laugh  
At what seems like a temporal gaffe.  
    The reason for mirth?  
    From the news to the birth  
Is only a week and a half.

### **A Mother's Difficulties**

The birth of a child is a miracle—  
But Mary, more grumpy than lyrical,  
    Tried hard not to whine  
    About month number nine  
And the fact that her belly was spherical.

*Christmas*

### **In the Beginning Was the Rhyme**

Like Christ's heavenly promise to Dismas,  
Like a ship cruising Panama's isthmus,  
    May Noel never cease  
    To bring bountiful peace,  
And I say unto you Merry Christmas!

### **The First Christmas Music**

In the age of Augustus the Caesar,  
No one sang any Christmas crowd-pleaser.  
    No Jew, Greek, or Roman  
    Knew Frosty the Snowman  
Or Rudolph's Remarkable Beezer.

But I hope there was music that night  
To welcome our God to the light.  
    If Joseph and Mary  
    Intoned *Miserere*,  
I'm sure that their son was all right.

# *Epiphany*

### **Kings and their Presents**

Neither Caspar nor Melchior nor Baltazar  
Would let snow drifts or icicles halt a czar.  
    If their gifts were ill-chosen,  
    The cold may have frozen  
Their brains; be not quick, then, to fault a czar.

### **Heat Was in the Very Sod**

With his fine philanthropical strolls,  
King Wenceslas taught us our roles.  
    We ignore at our peril  
    The point of his carol:  
Winter's for warming our souls.

### **Baptism of Christ**

At the Jordan, when Christ took a dip,  
God uttered a jubilant quip:  
    “What a son! What a day!  
    Let us all shout *Hooray!*  
(Preceded, of course, by *Hip, hip.*)”



*Lent*

### **A Poetic Manifesto**

Are limericks suited to Lent?  
Yes indeed, in both form and intent:  
    They're a well-designed ploy  
    To bring insight and joy  
With a final, uplifting event.

### **Lent and Its Challenges**

As we struggle through Lent to Christ's Passion,  
We may feel rather flaccid and ashen.  
    Let us strengthen our necks  
    And our souls and our pecs  
Like the Psalmist's great bullocks of Bashan.

### **Lent and College Basketball**

For a dose of fresh spiritual starch,  
Consider the Madness of March,  
    When we all are to blame—  
    But Christ wins the game  
With three points from the top of the arch.

*Easter*

### **Christ, the Salt of the Earth**

In Christ's wounds, which they'd caused with great odium,  
The world poured its chloride of sodium.  
    But God put a halt  
    To death's bitter assault  
And raised his sweet son to his podium.

### **The True Meaning of Easter**

Here's the question that Eastertide begs:  
Is it all about candy and eggs?  
    No, the point to be praised  
    Is that Christ has been raised  
(And death taken down a few pegs).

### **A Glorious Conclusion**

You don't *like* four-line limericks, *do ya?*  
Then respond to the chance I give *to ya*:  
    Having burst from his prison,  
    Now Christ is arisen—  
[response:] He is risen indeed: Alleluia!