

"You are God; we praise you. You are the Lord; we acclaim you. You are the eternal Father; all creation worships you."

December 31 is a day of thanksgiving for the blessings of the Old Year that is passing (yes, we can find blessings; perhaps “mixed blessing”). Traditionally the *Te Deum* is sung in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome on this day (formerly it was sung at the Church of the Gesù).

This traditional practice of praying or singing the *Te Deum* on December 31 offers us a day to thank God for all the days, a moment to bless all the moments of mind and heart, breath and sight. A time to “see” and savor.

This ancient and beautiful hymn of praise, formerly attributed both to St Augustine and St Ambrose and now more reliably ascribed to Nicetas of Remesiana (ca. 333/5-414), is so old that its provenance is uncertain (the lines extolling the apostles, prophets and martyrs echo some similar lines in a work of St Cyprian, but this seems to be coincidence. More recently it has been proposed that the *Te Deum* is part of an ancient Easter Vigil hymn.

The *Te Deum* (whose name is simply the first two words of the prayer itself, not unlike the title of a papal document) is unique in that it is a part of the Divine Office: it is prayed at the end of Matins/Vigils/Office of Readings after the final reading and before the closing prayer on Sundays and Holy Days. (According to the 1962 rubrics it is said *every single day*, outside of the penitential seasons of Lent and Advent.) The Divine Office may be a private prayer — and the Office of Readings may be recited at any hour of the day per the Vatican II rubrics — but for consecrated religious it is generally prayed in common in the middle of the night. So night owls who visit a monastery or abbey may hear it intoned—beautifully—together.

Another unique aspect of the *Te Deum*—the entire prayer is reprinted below—is that part of it is prayed during Mass (namely during the Sanctus):

Holy, holy, holy, Lord, God of power and might
Heaven and earth are full of your glory

And the final part of the *Te Deum* is a nod (or better, a kneel) to the *Credo* in that the lines are supposed to be said on your knees:

V: Save your people, Lord, and bless your inheritance.
R: Govern and uphold them now and always
V: Day by day we bless you.
R: We praise your name forever.
V: Keep us today, Lord, from all sin.
R: Have mercy on us, Lord have Mercy
V: Lord, show us your Love and Mercy
R: For we put our trust in you.
V: In you, Lord, is our hope:
R: And we shall never hope in vain.

Here we see an obvious invocation of the Kyrie from the Mass in the line, “Lord Have Mercy”, above.

Thus, the *Te Deum* is a prayer steeped in the Mass, and includes the only intact Hebrew word (“Saboath”) kept in the Latin version. The whole is a prayer of praise.

Technically, the *Te Deum* may be said or sung at the end of Mass or at the canonization of saint, or in a public procession of a saint’s relics.

The *Te Deum* is, in essence, a very ancient liturgical poem, and like many poems it has been put to music very effectively by some of the greatest composers, from Mozart and Verdi to Dvorak and Benjamin Britten.

And while *Te Deum* may be inextricably tied to the Divine Office, there’s no rule that says you can’t (or shouldn’t) pray or learn the prayer as a stand-alone oration.

The concluding line, “And we shall never hope in vain.” is an especially uplifting reminder to us individually and collectively.

Te Deum

You are God, we praise you:
You are the Lord: we acclaim you;
You are the eternal Father:
All creation worships you.
To you all angels, all the powers of heaven,
Cherubim and Seraphim, sing in endless praise:
 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of power and might,
 Heaven and earth are full of your glory.
The glorious company of apostles praise you.
The noble fellowship of prophets praise you.
The white-robed army of martyrs praise you.
Throughout the world, the holy Church acclaims you:
 Father of majesty unbounded,
 Your true and only Son, worthy of all worship,
 And the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide.
You, Christ, are the King of Glory
The eternal Son of the Father.
When you became man to set us free,
You did not spurn the Virgin’s womb.
You overcame the sting of death,
And opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.

You are seated at God’s right hand in glory.

We believe that you will come and be our judge.

Come then, Lord, and help your people,
Bought with the price of your own blood,
And bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.

Save your people, Lord, and bless your inheritance.

Govern and uphold them now and always
Day by day we bless you.

We praise your name forever.

Keep us today, Lord, from all sin.

Have mercy on us, Lord have Mercy
Lord, show us your Love and Mercy
for we put our trust in you.

In you, Lord, is our hope:
and we shall never hope in vain.

[Amen.]