

# THE STORY OF ITALY'S ONLY CHRISTMAS CAROL

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

Mosaics by Filippo Rusuti in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, dating to 1288, depict the story of the miraculous snowfall in Rome the night of August 4/5, 352 AD. Bottom, St. Peter's Square made white by the snow of 2018

I grew up in Manhattan and from 4th-12th grade sang in my parish choir. In high school I sang three times every Sunday: Sunday School's Mass at 9:30 AM, at 11:00 AM Mass for parents and parishioners, and Vespers at 8 PM.

When I moved to Rome after my college graduation, what I missed most, besides my family and friends, were the smell and contents of *The New York Times*, the St. Patrick's Day parade, Entenmann's donuts, and my choir, particularly at Christmas, because there was no such thing as carol services in Italy.

It took me only one holiday season to realize that in Italy there was no popular Christmas music. Actually, that's not quite right: there is one, and only one, Christmas song. When I first lived here, shepherds from the Abruzzi mountains used to flock down to Rome and play "*Tu scendi dalle stelle*" over and over again on their homemade bagpipes on almost every street corner. At first I couldn't help wondering why their repertoire was so limited. Sadly now, even this custom has disappeared, so my grandchildren have grown up with *Jingle Bells* and *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas*, instead.

Speaking of snow, blizzards are an almost unheard-of event in the Eternal City. Since I've lived here, blizzards have occurred in March 1971 (melting the same day); and in 1985 and 1986 on Epiphany, both of which froze and caused serious inconvenience and damage, especially to trees. Then, after a 30-year hiatus of no snow, there were two nearly back-to-back storms on February 4 and 10 in 2012, followed by February 26 and 27 in 2018, and lastly in 2019 on my saint's day, December 13th.

Historical snowfall data can be traced back to the



G. Galazka photo

winter of 1709, but the earliest mention of snow in Rome oddly dates to the night of August 4/5, 352 AD. Almost certainly a legend, it seems that for a long time a childless elderly patrician couple had wanted to use their wealth to honor God and prayed fervently for a signal on how to fulfill this desire. That August night an angel appeared to them in a dream and indicated to them that the next morning they would find snow, even though it was summer, on the site where they should build a church. The next morning the husband Giovanni rushed to recount his dream to Pope Liberius (r. 352-66), who surprisingly had had the very same dream. So together they, pope and patrician, went with a procession of priests to the angel's miraculous location on the Esquiline Hill, where on the still-intact snow they drew the perimeter of a new church. This early church was demolished in the 5th century during the reign (432-440) of Sixtus

III to build a more sumptuous one with the name of Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in remembrance of the council of Ephesus in 431. Mosaics by Filippo Rusuti dating to 1288 depict the story of the miracle. They are still visible today in the 18th-century *loggia* that covers the original façade. In addition, every year on August 5th, from 8 PM to midnight, the miracle is recreated using white rose petals for snow.

Now to return to "*Tu scendi dalle stelle*," we know its music and its lyrics were both written by St. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori. Thought of as an Italian song to be accompanied by *zampogna*, a large-format bagpipe, it's not well-known that today's carol was inspired by the Neapolitan folksong, "*Quanno nascette Ninno a Betlemme / Era nott'e pareva miezo journo*" (*When the baby was born in Bethlehem/it was nighttime but seemed*

noontime”) and that St. Alphonsus was the first priest to write lyrics in Neapolitan dialect for a religious song. The rest of its early history is a bit garbled. Some scholars believe that St. Alphonsus, a gifted musician, wrote the music in *pastorale* style, but with the lyrics in dialect on November 9, 1732, while he was staying at the Convent of the Consolation in the small city of Deliceto in the province of Foggia, and that Pope Pius IX translated the lyrics into Italian in 1870. Others think that St. Alphonsus wrote two versions, one with lyrics in dialect and one with lyrics in Italian, at the same time, in the city of Nola where he was bishop in December 1754.

In any case, “*Tu scendi dalle stelle*,” also entitled “*Canzoncina a Gesù Bambino*” (“*The Little Song for Baby Jesus*”), or “*A Gesù Bambino*” (“*For Baby Jesus*”) has seven verses of six lines each. Their lyrics are far from joyous, much less concerned with the joy of Baby Jesus’ birth than with the heart-rending sacrifice for mankind of his death. It seems that its author revised the text of his work several times, but the different musical versions could also be due to its popularity and the slight changes made in the different locations where it was first sung.

The composer Ottorino Respighi incorporated its music in the second movement of his symphonic poem *Trittico Botticelliano* (*Botticelli’s Triptych*), a work inspired by three of the artist’s most famous paintings: *La Primavera* (*Spring*), *L’Adorazione dei Magi* (*Adoration of the Three Kings*), and *La Nascita di Venere* (*The Birth of Venus*). Variations of its music were recorded in Claudio Villa’s *Le intramontabili* (1958), in *Topo Gigio en Navidad* (1961), in Luciano Pavarotti’s *Carnival* (1997), and most recently in the Piccoli Cantori di Torino’s *Buon Natale* (2011). Not to mention that the contemporary Piero Niro wrote a composition entitled *Three Variations on “Tu scendi dalle stelle” for a Large Orchestra* in 2000, and Andrea Bocelli recorded renditions in 2009 and 2015.

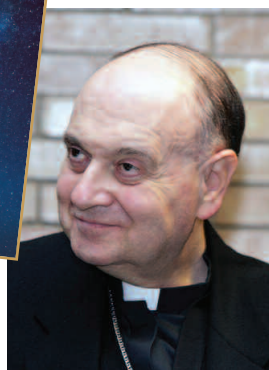
There are several translations of the lyrics into English. In the United States the piece was first published in 1932 by A. Paolilli’s Music Co. of Providence, Rhode Island, but credits the music to Tommaso Capocci and the words to Pope Pius IX with no mention of St. Alphonsus. In the 1960s several versions of the carol in English were recorded.

Although perhaps most famous for this carol,



St. Alphonsus Maria de' Liguori and the Vatican's 1996 stamp commemorating the 300th anniversary of his birth.

Bottom, Angelo Cardinal Comastri with his Christmas book published by San Paolo Edizioni



G. Galazka photo

Redemptorists, and on June 14, 1762 was appointed bishop of Sant’Agata dei Goti. In 1775, he was allowed to retire and went to live in the Redemptorist community in Pagani in the province of Salerno, where he died at age 90 on August 1, 1787. He is buried in the town’s basilica named for him.

A prolific writer, Alphonsus published nine editions of his *Moral Theology* (1748) during his lifetime. Among his best-known works are *The Glories of Mary* and *The Way of the Cross* still used in parishes during Lenten devotions. One of the most widely-read Catholic authors, on April 26, 1950 Pope Pius XII, who subsequently wrote of him in his encyclical *Haurietis aquas* about devotion to divine love (published on May 15, 1956), named him the patron saint of confessors and moral theologians as well as of lawyers. His feast day is August 1. In 1987 Italy issued a 400 *lire* stamp to commemorate the 200th anniversary of St. Alphonsus’ death, and in 1996 the Vatican issued a 1250 *lire* stamp to commemorate the 300th anniversary of his birth.

Previously, in September 1816, Pope Pius VII beatified him; on May 26, 1839 Pope Gregory XVI canonized him; and in 1871 Pope Pius IX proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church.

Just a few days ago, on November 3, San Paolo Edizioni published “*Tu scendi dalle stelle... ed è Natale*,” a new book published by the prolific writer Angelo Cardinal Comastri. Here His Eminence condemns the consumerism and egoism of contemporary Christmas and with this volume tries to help the reader find the real meaning of Christmas: hope and peace. ○