

# Processional

*Copied in 1351 for the Urbanist Clares of Flanders (Brussels), a community of Franciscan women  
Bequeathed by George A. Plimpton to Columbia University in 1936*

Intimate. Ancient. Well-used. These are the first impressions I have when presented with this small book of liturgical music from the 14th century. These processions, written down by Johannes de Havere in 1351, for me, are a mystery. Expecting the large liturgical book so prevalent in monasteries of its time, full of colorful illustrations and gold lettering, I was surprised to find a small and very simply bound book written with red and black ink. I imagine many fingers have caressed this book, held together by a brown leather seam and bound with paste-board artistically tattooed by time -- pages edged in dark shadow, curling just so. The pin pricks bordering each unevenly cut page spark my curiosity, as well as the notes like "*maria a patri et filio et...*" written throughout. An erasure of an original word ensnares my eye and imagination. The musical notes are black squares on red four-lined staves. Some notes are darker than others and I wonder if the lighter notes were written in later, along with the note stems and bar lines. Each page holds at least one red initial, some intricately adorned in a lighter ink with crosses and saints, dragons and other animals, and even what appears to be a red-lipped nun. The pages share written music and sacred lyrics written in Latin with blocks of text inserted throughout. Is it liturgy, a description of the processional? As I continue to leaf (carefully) through the pages, I begin to see accent marks and realize they have been with me the entire time. Soon I notice a change in the text color, and see that lyric lines are doubled, a page carefully mended with fine stitches, water damage, and evidence of an impertinent worm. The last few pages are noticeable added in.

This manuscript, considered a “lesser genre” of books for Mass was created to contain music for processions that came before Masses of feasts. (McGatch 20) Its size, 175 x 135 mm and 36 pages, was perfect, frugal and portable for the Urbanist Poor Clares community it was intended for. This community of nuns, also known as “Rich Clares” because they followed a Rule by Pope Urban IV that allowed the sisters joint possessions unlike the Poor Clares, danced in the sacred footsteps of St. Clare of Assisi who was the first woman to denounce the wealth of her family and embrace a monastic life in the Franciscan tradition. Although the Rich Clares accepted possessions, mainly to avoid any type of economic dependence on outside communities (specifically of monks who did not appreciate the responsibility of supporting these groups of women), both communities adhered to a strict vow of poverty. Commitment to a life behind convent walls meant a life of seclusion and religious contemplation – they were not allowed to leave, and on the rare event that visitors were allowed, they could only speak to the sisters through an iron gate covered by a cloth panel. Visitors could not look upon the nuns and the nuns could not look into the eyes of their visitors. Saint Clare revered this life of absolute seclusion and almost complete silence. Urbanist Poor Clares of the 14th century continued to uphold these vows, adhering to absolute silence in the church, refectory, and dormitory and speaking as little as possible in other spaces within the convent. (De Paermentier 53-63)

I imagine that most of the sounds created within the walls of such a sacred space came from liturgical music. Voices otherwise unheard came together in songs of praise to God, making this Processional, specifically for use at a convent in Flanders, even more cherished. Written on

parchment paper in formal gothic book hand with pages added at the end written in an irregular gothic book hand, the music is inscribed with square notation – the pinpricks at the edge of each page are used to measure the staves. Red initials lead short paragraphs of liturgical direction, prayer or psalm; red initials washed in yellow are followed by musical text. Bound in half roan over pasteboard, this Processional was written by the Benedictine monk and scribe, Johannes de Havere. (Dutschke)

The opening processional is for the Feast of Purification, or Candlemas, representing the entry of Christ into the Temple of Jerusalem. Held on February 2, participants of this ceremony sang the antiphon on page 1, "*Lumen ad revelationem gentium et gloriam plebis tuæ Israel*" (*A light to the revelation of the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*) During the procession, each sister carried a lit candle in her hands, singing, "*Adorna thalamum tuum, Sion,*" (*Adorn your chamber, Zion.*) "*Maria patri et filio*" (*Maria's father and son*) is written in above "*Deus, auribus nostris audivimu*" (*We have heard, O God, with our ears*) along with a few musical notes in a slightly lighter ink, perhaps to bring musical honor to the Divine Mother. Within the "*Nunc dimittis*" which is sung during the distribution of candles, a penna in nun wearing the "N" of "Nunc" as her coronet peers at the lyrics that follow: "*Nunc dimittis servum tuum in pace*" (*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace*). Tightly ensconced within the "P" of "*Postquam impleti sunt dies purgationis Mariae*" (*After the days of Mary's purification...*), lies an intricate drawing of a cross reminiscent of Orthodox crosses of Antioch and Ethiopia. The Candlemas procession ends with a choral introit, "*Suscepimus*" (*Undertaken*) – the "S" taken over by a rather playful dragon.

in iherusalem ut sisterent e um do mi no

Sequitur  
immedi  
ate. Inci

Sicut scriptū. Glā pū. tus. **S**uscipimus

In die palmarū q̄pleta tertia et aspersione aque more soli  
to frā ⁊ ramos palmarū in medio ante altare positus a cho  
ro cantatur anth. Osanna sicut in gradali q̄tinetur.  
Deinde sac̄s dicit collam. Ds q̄ dilige. Postea eplam. In  
dieb' ill. Deinde cantat p̄ ḡduali. Collegerit cū suo vsu. vel  
aliud. R. In mōte. Postea legit euuāḡliū. Cū appropiāss̄.  
Post hec b̄ndiq̄ rami ⁊ exp̄gūt aq̄ b̄ndā ⁊ ierulant. Postea  
due sorores ramos sororib' i suis locis manentib' distbu

**P**ueri hebreorum portantes  
anc. ⁊ iterā a  
choro cātatur  
anthie subsc̄p  
te. Pueri heb

ramos oliuarum obuiauerunt domino da

mantes et dicentes osanna in excelsis

The processional for the Feast of Palm Sunday proceeds unedited save a fleetingly added double bar line. Right before the procession returns to the church, the antiphon, "*Cum angelis et pueris fideles inveniamur, triumphatori mortis clamantes: Hosanna in excelsis!*" (Let us faithfully join with the angels and children, singing to the Conqueror of death: Hosanna in the highest!) is sung. "In excelsis" has been erased in this manuscript, yet the notes still remain, soaring to the uppermost bar line so that the actual text would never be missed. Upon entering the church, the sisters sang the "Gloria" hymn. Resting inside the "Cui" of "*Cui puerile decus prompsit Hosanna pium*" (...to whom the innocent children sang their fervent Hosanna) is a drollery of a childlike figure in a nun's habit and wings, head raised, and eyes cast down toward the text. More drolleries follow as the "Gloria" continues: "*Nomine*" becomes artful with a detailed pattern within the "N", "*Et mortalis homo*" becomes the home of a pirate, and "*Cum prece*" is fitted with a steepled hat or hennin popular in the 1420s.

The next processional is the Feast of Maundy Thursday. Aside from a few patterns drawn into letters of the text, the pages stand unmarred. The Feast of Francis processional begins "*o stupor et gaudium*" (Oh, awe and joy...), a haloed nun believed to be St. Clare, carrying a crozier in one hand and a monstrance in the other glances demurely out of the "O." Text specifically for St. Clare is written beneath each antiphon, verse and response -- "*O decus virgineum...*" (Glory of the Virgin...) Further into this processional more drolleries appear: "*Sub typo trium ordinum*" (under a type of three layers) houses a bird with a worm dangling from its mouth standing on the back



of an emaciated dog. A red lipped nun with animal-like limbs is found further.



Near the end lays a processional for a Funeral feast with chants for the service around the coffin and cemetery. Some of the pages seem wrinkled with slight water damage, and I can't help but wonder if the pages have been characterized from tears shed by the passing of a beloved sister. These pages have the most wear – a page has been stitched, another holds a worm hole. For the first time, extensive oration is included. Several pages of Psalms to be read at the burial and around the coffin were added before the antiphons and prayers over the grave. The original manuscript ends with a colophon written by Joannes de Havere.

The last processional for the Feast of Corpus Christi was added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The slow spread of this feast began in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, which could explain the later addition.

Els De Paermentier in a paper entitled, “Experiencing Space Through Women’s Convent Rules: The Rich Clares in Medieval Ghent (Thirteenth to Fourteenth centuries) stated that upon joining a convent, a nun denies her previous, secular individuality in order to assimilate into a collective identity. Space for private experiences dwindle as they “depersonalize” their identity. In a contemplative community such as this, liturgical songbooks and singing together becomes elevated in importance. In a recent study, the American Psychological Association touts the benefits of group singing calling it a “tool for social living” due to the hormone oxytocin that is released while singing. Oxytocin enhances feelings of trust and bonding, alleviating depression and loneliness – which much be prevalent at times in monastic communities. Singing also releases endorphins and dopamine, both associated with pleasure – another worldly desire denounced, and perhaps relished in song.

Perhaps this Processional became a symbol for these things – the therapeutic effects of singing together, the joy of a lovingly bonded community embedding its long term effects within the pages. Perhaps it also became a symbol for the hidden part of a sister’s heart that still relished her individuality. Upon opening the pages, her heart, her lips -- her unique expression escaped unbounded. Her notes left to fly and dance with the distinctive voices of her sisters. Such is held between two aged pasteboard covers intended for a community of “depersonalized” women who denounced all things of the world: a small key to living together in harmony, pleasure, and individuality.



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