

Musical Technique and Symbolism in *Noël* from Olivier Messiaen's  
*Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*: A Defense of Messiaen's Words and Music

by

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PREVIEW

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MUSICAL TECHNIQUE AND SYMBOLISM IN *NOËL* FROM OLIVIER  
MESSIAEN'S *VINGT REGARDS SUR L'ENFANT JÉSUS*:  
A DEFENSE OF MESSIAEN'S WORDS AND MUSIC

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University of Nebraska, 2008

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Between April 1945 and September 1946, Olivier Messiaen was at the center of a controversy among music critics in Parisian journals and newspapers, an affair which came to be known as “Le ‘Cas’ Messiaen.” At stake were a number of issues about Messiaen’s work in general, one of which was his insistence on reading commentary before performances which explained both the musical and extra-musical content of his compositions. Messiaen’s persistent desire, even in the face of caustic criticism, to explain both the theological and musical content in the *Vingt Regards* is evidence that his writings are important in understanding the cycle.

This document examines a piece in the cycle that has received little or no attention, the thirteenth *Regard* of the cycle entitled *Noël*. *Noël* stands at an important structural apex in the entire cycle and it was specifically singled out for praise because of its moving content by Marc Pincherle who reviewed the premiere of the cycle, thus providing a direct link between this particular piece and the commentary that Messiaen provided for the piece at its premiere.

The comprehensive analysis of this single piece is based on Messiaen’s preface to the Durand edition of the *Vingt Regards* (“Note de l’Auteur”), a 1954 analysis of the piece included in the second volume of the *Traité de rythme*, and Messiaen’s own program notes for the 1970 Michel Béroff recording of the cycle. Taking Messiaen’s own words about his music as the starting point, the analysis shows how Messiaen’s

commentary in all three sources can profoundly contribute to our understanding of his compositional style and the symbolism of the work. Exhaustive analysis also grants the opportunity to discover the enormous amount of depth and symbolic potential in every compositional element in Messiaen's work, a depth which is left unexplored in more comprehensive analyses of the cycle as a whole. A case is made that Messiaen persevered with his commentary because it is so crucial in understanding his work.

PREVIEW

to my parents

PREVIEW

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This document is gratefully dedicated to my loving parents. They have taught me the value of hard work and how to strive for goals that seem unreasonable. Most of all, they have shown me unfathomable, selfless generosity – a quality that they exemplify in all of their actions. I only hope that some day I too will be able to be a pale reflection of their virtue.

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“God dazzles us by excess of Truth.

Music carries us to God in default of Truth.

Thou speakest to God in music: He is going to answer thee in music.

Know the joy of the Blessed by gentleness of color and melody.

And may there be opened for thee the secrets of Glory!”

- Text by Messiaen for his Opera *Saint François d'Assise*,  
Act II, Scene 4

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Between April 1945 and September 1946, Olivier Messiaen was at the center of a controversy among music critics in Parisian journals and newspapers. The affair came to be known as “Le ‘Cas’ Messiaen,” named for a particular article written in the October-December 1945 issue of the Catholic journal *Les Études* entitled “Musique et Mystique: Le ‘Cas’ Messiaen.”<sup>1</sup> The article was written by a man named Bernard Gavoty who, under the pseudonym “Clarendon” began the whole debate earlier that year with his negative review of the premiere of *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* in the journal *Le Figaro*.<sup>2</sup>

At stake were a number of issues about Messiaen’s work in general. Messiaen had just released his *Technique de mon langage musical*, a treatise explaining his musical techniques. Such an honest divulgence of one’s compositional devices (especially ones that were so innovative in the areas of mode, harmony, and rhythm) would leave anyone open to attack and Messiaen shows in his preface to *Technique* that he knew that he was not immune, but that he felt the need to explain the details of his music in spite of the risk of criticism. “It is always dangerous to speak of oneself. However, several persons have vigorously either criticized or praised me, and always wrongly and for things I had not done.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Music and Mystic: the Messiaen ‘Affair.’” ; Bernard Gavoty, “Musique et mystique: Le ‘Cas’ Messiaen,” *Les Études* Oct. 1945, 21-37.

<sup>2</sup> Lilise Boswell-Kurc, “Olivier Messiaen’s Religious War-Time Works and Their Controversial Reception in France (1941-46),” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2001) 3, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Messiaen, *Technique de mon langage musicale*, trans. John Satterfield (Paris: Leduc, 1944) preface.

In an article written shortly after Gavoty's scathing analysis of the *Vingt Regards* premiere, Georges Auric voiced the opinion that while Messiaen was a talented composer, such a strict systematization of his musical language was disturbing.<sup>4</sup> Gavoty's central article ("Le Cas Messiaen") warns likewise: "One perceives immediately the danger, which lies in the excess of a system. Messiaen makes us aware of it all throughout a vast treatise, erudite and irritating, *Technique de mon langage musicale*." Musically speaking, critics expressed a concern that Messiaen would become (or had already become) enslaved to such an exacting system, one which they perceived to allow little freedom.

Most of the concerns regarding Messiaen's works, however, had to do with their extra-musical content. Critics questioned Messiaen's presentation of sacred subjects (the end of time, the presence of God in the soul, etc.) in a way that they thought smacked of a sensuality merely robed in religious mysticism. They accused him of mixing the profane with the profound in an abhorrent way. At the same time, they thought that the subjects of his compositions were too ineffable to be broached and claimed that Messiaen set divine mysteries under an inappropriate and impossible microscopic inspection. Moreover, they thought that his religious music simply didn't *sound* like religious music, that Messiaen's content simply didn't match the sound of the pieces.<sup>5</sup> Of the premiere of the *Vingt Regards*, Bernard Gavoty said, "There is a persistent contradiction here: like a lunatic curator of a vanished museum, the composer announces marvels when he speaks,

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<sup>4</sup> Boswell-Kurc, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Boswell-Kurc, 76-77.

but which the piano immediately refutes. There's not a hint of tenderness in this suite of 'regards' upon the Infant-God."<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most unanimous complaint among both Messiaen supporters and detractors, however, was his insistence on reading commentary before performances which explained both the musical and extra-musical content of the piece. In a two-part article during April 1946 entitled "Y-a-t-il un cas Messiaen?", ten prominent musical figures shared their thoughts on Messiaen in light of the debate of the past year and over half of them mentioned their disdain for the commentary that accompanied performances of Messiaen's works. Fred Goldbeck believed that Messiaen should share his odd imagery and grotesque commentary in a more surrealist setting, rather than in a work with religious connotations. Roland-Manuel found the commentary to be stylistically impoverished.<sup>7</sup> Gavoty's review of the *Vingt Regards* premiere said, "The abysmal commentaries by Messiaen are more than enough, and one might mistake a transcription of them for a parody."<sup>8</sup>

Yet through the relentless criticism of this approach to interaction with his audience, Messiaen continued his commentary and explanation throughout his entire life, including a "Note from the Author" or Preface explaining the religious and musical content in nearly every publication. When asked about the relation of his commentary to his compositions, Messiaen's answers give a glimpse into the reason why he obstinately continued to include them. In a public discussion in 1968, when speaking about the biblical and liturgical quotations connected to his music, Messiaen said, "These

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<sup>6</sup> Peter Hill and Nigel Simeone, *Olivier Messiaen* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005) 144.

<sup>7</sup> Boswell-Kurc, 23-26.

<sup>8</sup> Hill and Simeone, 144.

quotations are of the greatest significance; I'd go so far as to say that, if that were not the case, I might just as well pack up; I wouldn't compose any more music." Also, after describing his methods for researching a theological topic, Messiaen said, "And, of course, I require the interpreting artist to make a close study of all these things, of all the ideas I want to express – indeed, I even ask that he believe in them to a certain extent, in order to be able to convey them to the listener."<sup>9</sup> In these comments, Messiaen makes clear that his commentary gives both listeners and performers absolutely crucial insights into the *raison d'être* for the compositions, and that knowledge of the theological and musical content contained in the commentary is essential for the performer trying to interpret the pieces.

Perhaps the most significant reason for the commentary (both at performances and in printed publications), however, was to introduce an unfamiliar audience with a music that might be misunderstood or only vaguely comprehended in the absence of explanation. In a conversation with Almut Rößler in 1983, Messiaen stated:

"My commentaries have been strongly criticized. In my earlier days, for instance when Yvonne Loriod launched the *Vingt Regards*, I read aloud the relevant annotation before each individual movement. That gave rise to a real scandal, doubtless due to the poetic and mystical character of these commentaries. I was declared mad – that was horrid. But nevertheless I insisted that these texts of which I'm very fond be included in the printed score, so that interpreting artists will read them – naturally without obligation to read them aloud. The music can most certainly be played on its own – I think that's even better. When the music was still completely unknown, I considered a knowledge of the annotations to be necessary, but now that everyone knows it, I no longer do."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Almut Rößler, *Contributions to the Spiritual World of Olivier Messiaen* (Duisburg, West Germany: Gilles & Francke, 1986), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Rößler, 135.

While he may have considered verbal commentary at concerts unnecessary after the music became more well-known, Messiaen persisted in his desire to help listeners and performers understand the *Vingt Regards* by expanding his program notes in the liner notes for Michel Béroff's 1970 recording of the cycle. Although this set of program notes sometimes omits information contained in the Author's note of the piano score, more often than not it greatly expands the explanations seen in the score, especially in regard to musical techniques and Messiaen's description of color in the piece.<sup>11</sup>

The culmination of Messiaen's desire to explain culminated in the seven-volume posthumously published *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d'ornithologie*, a work he wrote to update and greatly expand his earlier *Technique de mon langage musicale*. Yvonne Loriod-Messiaen<sup>12</sup> inserted an analysis of the cycle specifically addressing rhythm into the second volume of the treatise. Messiaen had written the analysis for a course that he taught at the Musikhochschule in Saarbrücken in 1954.

Messiaen's persistent desire, even in the face of caustic criticism, to explain both the theological and musical content in the *Vingt Regards* is evidence that his writings are important in understanding the cycle. Despite this indication, Messiaen's writings are a frequently untapped source in understanding the cycle.

This is partially due to the fact that some of the analyses of the cycle were

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<sup>11</sup> The originally released LP version of this recording is no longer published, but an appendix in David Rogosin's dissertation on the cycle reproduces them in full. Original recording: EMI, "La Voix de son Maître," 2C 065-10676/78 S ; David Rogosin, "Aspects of Structure in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*," (DMA dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1996), 209-224.

<sup>12</sup> Messiaen's second wife who premiered nearly all of his works for piano



published before the second volume of the *Traité de rythme* and that the liner notes for the Béroff recording are no longer widely available. Even so, analyses published after the *Traité* nearly unanimously fail to consult Messiaen's analysis and many do not even acknowledge the existence of the liner notes.

Numerous studies and dissertations have been written to explain different facets, compositional principles, and content of the *Vingt Regards*. A dissertation by McKinnon provides a good introduction to the piece, as well as a good discussion of Messiaen's compositional principle of *color*. She analyzes each piece in the set, but the analysis is rather shallow, often reaching conclusions that are not supported by the composer's own analysis of the piece.<sup>13</sup> A dissertation by Hyeweon Lee expands the discussion of color, but her symbolic analysis is unsatisfactory as she uses the psychological approach to symbolic content of Carl Jung, a thinker whose ideas Messiaen would undoubtedly have found loathsome.<sup>14</sup> Another attempt at analyzing the "timeless qualities" of a selection of pieces from the collection by Eun Young Lee exhibits a sincere lack of understanding and sympathy for Messiaen's style, often failing to understand the vital connections between Messiaen's music and his faith.<sup>15</sup>

Whitmore's analysis of the cycle's rhythmic content<sup>16</sup> as well as David Rogosin's musically substantial analysis of structural aspects of the piece are more successful in

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<sup>13</sup> Heather Price McKinnon, "Symbolism and Theology as Compositional Genesis in *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant Jésus* by Olivier Messiaen" (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1991).

<sup>14</sup> Hyeweon Lee, "Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur L'Enfant-Jésus*: A Study of Sonority, Color, and Symbol" (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Eun Young Lee, "Timeless Qualities in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jésus*" (M.M. thesis, University of Texas-Austin, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Brooks Blaine Whitmore, "Rhythmic Techniques in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jésus*" (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Texas-Austin, 2000).

analyzing the cycle in a way that is congruent with Messiaen's own analysis.<sup>17</sup> A study by Tuite on the connection between symbolism and structure, although lacking proper footnotes, rigor and, ironically, structure, makes insightful comments about the connection between Messiaen's *Vingt Regards* and theological realities through Messiaen's number, color and rhythmic symbolism by placing Messiaen's art in an historical evolutionary context.<sup>18</sup> Tuite, Bowlby,<sup>19</sup> and especially Bruhn analyze the entire cycle as a complicated interweaving of symbolic layers, focusing especially on the use and development of the main themes given in the preface.<sup>20</sup> The analyses by both Bruhn and Bowlby make clear how the extra-musical content of the cycle is symbolically represented by all of the musical elements of the composition.

The analysis in this document contributes to the existing body of scholarship on the *Vingt Regards* by looking at a piece in the cycle that has received extremely slim attention by some analysts, even by the two writers that who have made the most significant contributions to understanding the symbolism contained in the cycle (Bowlby and Bruhn). The thirteenth *Regard* in the cycle of twenty is entitled *Noël*, a piece which, according to a forthcoming paper by Cannata, stands at a very important structural apex

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<sup>17</sup> David Rogosin, "Aspects of Structure in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jésus*." (D.M.A. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Maurice Tuite, "Symbolism and Design in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jesus*: A Disquisition on the Relationship Between the Design/Form/Architecture of Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jesus* and Christian Theological Symbolism" (D.M.A. dissertation, Peabody Conservatory, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Christopher S. Bowlby "Vingt Regards Sur l'Enfant-Jésus : Messiaen's Means of Conveying Extra-Musical Subtext." (D.M.A. dissertation, University of Washington, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Siglind Bruhn, *Messiaen's Contemplations of Covenant and Incarnation : Musical Symbols of Faith in the Two Great Piano Cycles of the 1940s*, Dimension & Diversity; no. 7, (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2007).

in the entire cycle.<sup>21</sup> Also, this piece was specifically singled out for praise because of its moving content by Marc Pincherle who reviewed the premiere of the cycle, thus providing a direct link between this particular piece and the commentary that Messiaen provided for the piece at its premiere.<sup>22</sup> This piece contains many of Messiaen's most important musical elements including: a theme which has been developed in various pieces throughout the cycle, inferior and superior resonances, Hindu rhythms, additive rhythms, arsis and thesis in rhythm (à la Dom Mocquereau of Solesmes) modes of limited transposition, color, a unique approach to form, number symbolism, and timbral association. All of these musical elements will be analyzed for their musical and theological significance in light of Messiaen's own analysis and commentary on the piece. The discussion in this document will also draw connections between *Noël* and the work as a whole, showing instances in other pieces of Messiaen's use of rhythm, timbre, resonance, etc.

Focusing on a single piece in this cycle will allow extensive analysis of Messiaen's method of weaving a web of symbolism. An extensive analysis will also show the enormous amount of depth and symbolic potential in every compositional element in Messiaen's work, a depth which is left unexplored in more comprehensive analyses of the cycle as a whole. It will also allow for the opportunity to show how Messiaen's commentary (in all three previously mentioned sources) can profoundly

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<sup>21</sup> David Butler Cannata, "Messiaen Reads the Infancy Gospels: The *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* as Christology," Unpublished paper presented at "Messiaen the Theologian Conference," Boson University, October 13, 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Hill and Simeone, 146.

contribute to our understanding of his compositional style and the symbolism of the work.

Moreover, a thorough analysis of a single piece will demonstrate that the musical language presented in *Technique de mon langage musical* does indeed convey the theological content that Messiaen claimed. This type of analysis also intends to prove that while Messiaen's music may have not sounded like religious music to his audiences, every element of this particular composition proclaims theological truths and does so on multiple levels. In short, the analysis contained in this document can serve as a response to many of the criticisms leveled against Messiaen and his work in "Le 'Cas' Messiaen."

The document will conclude with a discussion of the important role that Messiaen's words (his analysis and commentary) provide in analyzing *Noël*. Basing the analysis in this document on Messiaen's own writings on the cycle is an exercise in allowing the composer to explain himself and taking him at his word, an exercise that will provides enormous insight into his compositions. Embarking on this exercise does not imply a blind faith in the ability of a composer to fully understand and explain himself and his compositions. Rather, it allows Messiaen, a man whose pedagogical ability and musical insight were legendary at the *Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris* and elsewhere, an opportunity to teach us about what he found to be most interesting in his musical language and the composition at hand.

Two notes of a more pragmatic nature are necessary at this juncture. First, the measures in the piano score of the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus* are not numbered, nor are there any rehearsals numbers or letters given. This fact is complicated by the fact

that many of Messiaen's measures begin on one stave only to spill over into the next. To avoid confusion when making reference to the score, a numbering system developed by David Rogosin in his document on the cycle has been adapted for use in this document. Because the page numbers, etc. for all of the Durand (who owns sole rights for the score) printings of the volume containing the cycle are identical, it is possible to cross reference all scores by referring to page, system and bar-line numbers. Thus, the 1<sup>st</sup> measure of the 2<sup>nd</sup> system on page 90 will be referred to in a descending hierarchy as: 90-2-1. Likewise, when measures spill over into the next stave, the measure will be referred to based on its position in the stave rather than the fact that it is the continuation of a measure from a previous stave. For example, measure 3 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> system on page 91 spills over into the third system of the page. Thus the measure would be collectively referred to as 91-2-3 and 91-3-1 even though the two excerpts are technically from the same measure.<sup>23</sup>

The second practical issue is that of French translation and capitalization. The English translation is given for nearly all of Messiaen's texts and quotations used in this document. One major exception to this rule is that of the word "*regard*." This term is not easily translatable from the French to the English although the phrase "contemplative gaze" is fairly accurate. Given the cumbersome nature of writing "contemplative gaze" repeatedly, however, the original French has been retained in most cases. The original French is also retained in the names of the individual movements from the cycle. Also, the original French capitalization has been retained. Normal rules regarding capitalization in French frequently limit the capital letter in titles only to the very first

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<sup>23</sup> David Rogosin, "Aspects of Structure in Olivier Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*," (DMA dissertation, University of British Columbia, 1996), xviii.

word as well as proper nouns. Messiaen's personal style, however, extended the capital letter to frequently involve words that refer directly to God, the Virgin Mary, and the Angels, as well as several other important concepts. For example in the title of the sixth *Regard* would appear in English as: *Through Him All Was Made*. Messiaen's title capitalizes the first word of the title, as well as the pronoun that directly refers to Christ: *Par Lui tout a été fait*. This study will retain Messiaen's principle of capitalizing theological events (e.g. Resurrection, Incarnation) and words referring to God (e.g. Him, etc.) as well. Finally, French words and the titles of books, the cycle in general, and the individual movements of the cycle will appear in italics, and the regular English "quotation marks" have replaced those of « the French. »

## Chapter 2

### The Bells of *Noël* – Unlocking Messiaen’s Commentary in Measures 1-7

The inscription that Messiaen provides in the “*Note de l’Auteur*” for *Noël*, the 13<sup>th</sup> *Regard* in Messiaen’s set of 20 contemplative gazes on the Infant-God, is among the shortest of all the pieces in the cycle: “Carillon – The bells of Christmas say with us the sweet names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph...”<sup>1</sup> *Noël* opens with the tempo marking “Très vif, joyeux” and “(comme des cloches)” is seen between the bottom two staves (Figure 2.1). In his own analysis of the piece, Messiaen describes the first part of the piece as “Carillon. Divers effets de cloches.”<sup>2</sup> The accents on every chord within the first four bars, combined with the brisk tempo marking ( $\text{♩} = 168$ ) evoke bells ringing with joy in the newborn Word Incarnate at Christmastime.

#### *Jesus, Mary and Joseph: Allusion to Popular Piety and Scripture*

The commentary for *Noël* marks the first and only time the figure of Joseph, the step-father of Jesus, is evoked in the prefatory commentary of the cycle. It is used in a context that for many Catholics evokes the popular devotion of pairing the names Jesus, Mary, and Joseph together to create the acronym J.M.J., an acronym which is frequently scrawled across the top of a page upon which one is about to write, thus invoking the presence of God in one’s daily activities.<sup>3</sup> This frequent pairing of names, not to be

<sup>1</sup> “Carillon – Les cloches de Noël disent avec nous les doux noms de Jésus, Marie, Joseph. . .”

<sup>2</sup> “Carillon. Various bell effects.” Olivier Messiaen, *Traité de rythme, de couleur, et d’ornithologie*, Vol. II (Seven Volumes, Paris: Alphonse Leduc, 1994-2002), 473.

<sup>3</sup> “Ecclesiastical Abbreviations,” The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume I (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907), accessed at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01022a.htm> on January 25, 2008.

confused with the title “The Holy Family”, is also frequently found in devotional prayers such as the following:

Jesus, Mary, Joseph,  
I give you my heart,  
My spirit and my life.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph,  
Assist me in my last agony.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph,  
That my soul may repose in peace  
In your holy company.<sup>4</sup>

The commentary for the piece brings the listener to a specific point in the Nativity narrative, the moment that Luke describes in chapter 2, verse 16 of his gospel: “And they<sup>5</sup> came with haste: and they found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger.” This is the point frozen in Christmas crèche scenes, and one that is quintessential for the world’s vision of Christmas: Mary and Joseph kneel in adoration of the Babe who lies in a manger. In addition to the obvious fact that the gaze of the Church falls on the figures of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, present in the cave in Bethlehem, it is possible that Messiaen, when he wrote the commentary, had a prayer similar to the one above which invoked the “sweet names of Jesus, Mary, [and] Joseph” in a Christmas-specific context.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.catholicdoors.com/prayers/french/fran132.htm>, Accessed January 25, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The Shepherds – see Luke 2: 8-15.