



## Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning

**Text: Thomas de Celano (c. 1200—c. 1265)**

**Tune: Latin, 13th century**

“Day of Wrath, O Day of Mourning” is a translation of a famous Latin chant, the *Dies Irae*. It is based on Zephaniah 1:14-16, a reflection upon the final judgment. Originally a part of the Roman funeral Mass, it has since been removed and finds a home in these last days of the Church Year when the second coming of Christ is discussed.

The *Dies Irae* is a medieval Latin poem describing the day of judgment, the last trumpet summoning souls before the throne of God, and the judgment of all men. It was a part of the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass, until its removal in the Second Vatican Council liturgical reforms. However, they allowed for its retention during the Prayer Offices of Matins, Lauds, and Vespers during the weeks leading into Advent. It was removed from the funeral liturgy because of a renewed focus on Christian hope and faith in Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

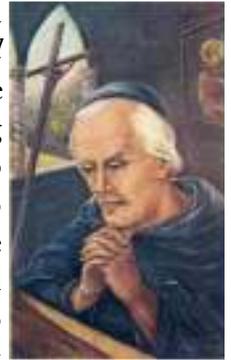
Although the author is unknown, it is assumed that it was written by Thomas de Celano, a friend and biographer of St. Francis of Assisi. He was one of the first Franciscan monks, and one of the first of the Order to visit Germany. In 1223 he was named *custos unicus* (sole guardian) of the Franciscans in Rhineland. However, by 1260 he had returned to native Italy, where he died sometime between 1260-1270.

Seq. 1.

D I-es irae, dí-es ílla, Sólvet saeclum in favílla :

The first line of the *Dies Irae* in Gregorian notation.

The translation we have was made by William J. Irons. He first published it in *Introits and Hymns for Advent*, released in 1848. He made the English translation after witnessing the moving funeral of Monseigneur D.A. Affre, the Archbishop of Paris, who was shot June 25, 1848 trying to calm rioting insurgents. The political climate made it impossible to hold his funeral immediately, but by July 7, 1848 they were able to hold his funeral at Notre Dame in Paris. The *Dies Irae* was sung in its usual place in the funeral by a massed choir of priests. The intense emotions of the day and accompanying situation made such an impression on Irons that he immediately went to work on a modern English rendering of this great Latin chant.



Thomas de Celano

This chant has also made a lasting impression in the world of literature and music. The words have been used by several works of literature. The music world has used the chant melody in several great compositions, most notably Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*; *Mars, the Bringer of Old Age* in Gustav Holst’s suite *9 Planets*; and Camille Saint-Saëns *Symphony no. 3 (Organ Symphony)*.

As we approach the end of the church year, this text is incredibly appropriate for the attitude and preaching of this time. Although the text may initially sound depressing, it is far from it. While the text sobers the hearer and singer, it is a sobering that quickly gives way to a living hope. While judgment is fearful for sinners, as Christians we have Christ as our Savior who has already conquered in the battle and has given His victory to us through Baptism.

The first six stanzas have a strong emphasis on the events of Judgment Day. We sing of the descend of Christ as Judge of all, the reading of man’s deeds, and the dead being raised. Stanzas 7-8 are a plea for mercy, asking for Jesus, in His mercy, to befriend us. Stanzas 9-13 then explain why Christ befriends us. We sing of His saving work for us: His Incarnation, Passion, death, and resurrection. Finally, stanzas 14-19 sing of the hope of heaven, the sure confidence that Christ will number us with His favored sheep because of His Cross and mercy