Written examples of teaching and preaching about Christ’s birth demonstrate this same devotional approach in their emphasis on wonder. Even in the learned genre of a Latin Biblical commentary, Cornelius á Lapide stresses that Christ’s birth defies understanding: “The Word was made flesh, God was made man, the Son of God was made the son of a Virgin. This […] was of all God’s works the greatest and best, such that it stupefied and stupefies the angels and all the saints.”

In a model sermon for Christmas, Fray Luis de Granada draws on all his rhetorical skills to exhort worshippers to marvel at the sight and sound of Christ at his lowly birth:

Come and see the Son of God, not in the bosom of the Father [Jn 1], but in the arms of the Mother; not above choirs of angels, but among filthy animals; not seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high [Heb 1], but reclining in a stable for beasts; not thundering and casting lightning in Heaven, but crying and trembling from cold in a stable.

The result of contemplating this mystery, according to Fray Luis, is to be “struck numb” with amazement:

What theme, then, can cause any greater wonder? Oh Lord our God, says Saint Cyprian, how admirable is your name in all the earth [Ps 8:1]! Truly you are the God who works miracles [Ps 77:14]. […] I do not wonder at the figure of the world, nor the firmness of the earth […]; I marvel to see how the all-powerful one in the crib; I marvel to see how the word of God could take on flesh, and how, while God is a spiritual substance, he received the clothing of a body. […] In this mystery the greatness of the shock steals away all my senses, and with the prophet [Hb 3] it makes me cry out: Lord, I heard your words, and I feared: I considered your works, and I was struck numb. With good reason, indeed, you are amazed, Prophet: for what thing could surprise anyone more, than that to which the Evangelist here refers in a few words, saying, “She gave birth to her only-begotten son, and she wrapped him in some rags, and laid him in a manger, because she did not find another place in that stable?”

Lapide’s exegesis and Fray Luis’s preaching guide the faithful to the right kind of devotion at Christmas—to an affective response of awe at the mystery of Christ’s birth.

Spanish devotional music for Christmas seems designed primarily to cultivate this same attitude of wonder. Padilla’s setting of Voces, las de la capilla evokes wonder not only in the words in the virtuoso composition and performance of the music as well. The villancico aims less to instruct than to amaze. This supports Mary Gaylord’s argument that the goal of elaborate Spanish poetry is “to produce effects of astonishment and awe conveyed by the Latin term admiratio.” Indeed, Padilla’s piece specifically asks listeners to imagine a song that is “as much to hear as to admire [admirar],/ as much to admire as to hear.”

The concept of admiratio is, in fact, central to the Christmas liturgy. It is encapsulated in the fourth Responsory of Matins, O magnum mysterium et admirabile sacramentum:

Respond. O great mystery and admirable sacrament, that the animals should see the newborn Lord, lying in the manger. Blessed Virgin, whose womb was worthy to bear the Lord Christ.

Versicle. Greetings, Mary, full of grace: The Lord is with you.

In his sermon Fray Luis alludes to this Responsory in terms quite similar to those in Padilla’ villancico, when he cries out, “O venerable mystery, more to be felt than to be spoken of; not to be explained with words but to be adored with wonder in silence.”

This same Responsory was probably paired with Padilla’s Voces, las de la capilla in the Puebla Cathedral liturgy on Christmas Eve 1657. Based on the position of this villancico in the Puebla musical manuscripts, it was most likely sung as the fourth villancico in the Matins cycle. This means that in accord with a 1633 decree of the cathedral chapter the villancico would have occupied the same liturgical time and space as the Responsory O magnum mysterium. The chapter mandated that while “the lessons should be sung in their entirety,” “the chanzoneta shall serve for the Responsory, which shall be prayed speaking while the singing is going on.” This villancico stood in between the lessons of the second Nocturne, which were taken from a Christmas sermon of Leo the Great. This means that after a cantor chanted the first lesson, a reader spoke the mandatory liturgical text of the fourth Responsory above \*while\* the chorus sang this villancico. The conjunction of texts may not have communicated much to the lay people outside the walls of the architectural choir, who could not hear or understand the words of the Latin liturgical texts; but for the learned cathedral canons, the simultaneous performance of the Latin prayer and Spanish song would have deepened the hidden connections between the two.

The Responsory evokes the scenario of the Nativity, with the animals gathered around the manger, just as the villancico calls up the image of angels, beasts, and humans joining together in song around the Christ-child. In the quatrain (a redondilla) that closes the estribillo, the lines tan de oír y de admirar/ tan de admirar y de oír actually seem like a reply to the Responsory, as though to say that the mystery of the Incarnate Christ certainly was an “admirable” sacrament—that is, one that can be seen—but it is also an audible sacrament. Listeners in Puebla could not visit the manger in Bethlehem; they could only look at the retable paintings of the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Visitation of the Kings and imagine. But in the conception of this villancico, they could hear the “voices of the chapel choir” reverberating in the space and through those voices they could “hear the voice of the Father/ singing in tones of weeping”—that is, they could hear the Christ the Word himself not merely speaking, but singing, through all the other voices from the choirboys up to the angels.

## Notes

Cornelius à Lapide, In Quatuor Evangelia, Commentaria in scripturam sacram (London: J. P. Pelagaud, 1868), 50, on Mt 1:15: “q. d. Verbum caro factum est, Deus factus est homo, Filius Dei factus est Filius Virginis. Hoc, […] fuit omnium Dei operum summum et maximum, ideoque illud stupuerunt et stupent Angeli, Sanctique omnes.”

Luis de Granada, Sermon en la fiesta del nascimiento de nuestro señor, Biblioteca de autores españoles 11 (1595; Madrid, 1945), 37: “Venid á ver al Hijo de Dios, no en el seno del Padre, sino en los brazos de la Madre; no sobre los coros de los ángeles, sino entre viles animales; no asentado á la diestra de la Majestad en las alturas, sino reclinado en un pesebre de bestias; no tronando y relampagueando en el cielo, sino llorando y temblando de frio en un establo.”

Ibid., 38: “¿Pues qué cosa puede ser de mayor maravilla? ¡Oh Señór Dios nuestro, dice Sant Cipriano, cuán admirable es vuestro nombre en toda la tierra! Verdaderamente vos sois Dios obrador de maravillas. Ya no me maravillo de la figura del mundo, ni de la firmeza de la tierra […]; sino maravíllome de ver al Todopoderoso en la cuna; maravíllome de ver cómo á la palabra de Dios se pudo pegar carne, y cómo siendo Dios substancia espiritual, recibió vestidura corporal. […] En este la grandeza del espanto roba todos mis sentidos, y con el Profeta me hace clamar: Señor, oi tus palabras, y temí: consideré tus obras, y quedé pasmado. Con mucha razon por cierto os espantais, Profeta; porque ¿qué cosa mas para espantar, que la que aquí en pocas palabras nos refiere el Evangelista, diciendo: Parió á su Unigénito, y envolvióle en unos pañales, y acostóle en un pesebre, porque no halló otro lugar en aquel establo?”

Mary Malcolm Gaylord, “The Making of Baroque Poetry,” in The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature, ed. David Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 227.

Catholic Church, Breviarium Romanum ex decretum Sacros. Conc. Trid. Restitutum Pii V. Pont. Max. iuss editum, & Clementis VIII Primum, nunc denuo Vrbani Pp. VIII auctoritate recognitum ([Rome?], 1631), 175: “Respond. O magnum mysterium, & admirabile sacramentum, vt animalia vidêrent Dominum natum, iacentem in praesepio: Beata Virgo, cuius viscera meruerunt portare Dominum Christum. Versicle. Ave Maria, gratia plena: Dominus tecum.”

MEX-Pc: AC 1633-12-30: “que a los maitines de nauidad deste año y de los venideros […] se canten todas las liçiones yn totum sin dejar cossa alguna dellas y que la chansoneta sirba de Responsorio el qual se diga resado mientrass se estubiere cantando.”