

THE DIVINE OFFICE

BRO. EMMANUEL NUGENT, O. P.



PIRITUAL life must be supplied by spiritual energy. An efficient source of spiritual energy is prayer. From Holy Scripture we learn that we should pray always. In general, this signifies that whatever we do should be done for the honor and glory of God. In a more restricted sense, it requires that each day be so divided that at stated intervals we offer to God acts of prayer.

From a very early period it has been the custom of the Church, following rather closely the custom that prevailed among the Chosen People, and later among the Apostles and early Christians, to arrange the time for her public or official prayer as follows: Matins and Lauds (during the night), Prime (6 A. M.), Tierce (9 A. M.), Sext (12 M.), None (3 P. M.), Vespers (6 P. M.), Compline (nightfall). The Christian day is thus sanctified and regulated and conformed to the verses of the Royal Psalmist: "I arose at midnight to give praise to Thee" (Matins), "Seven times a day have I given praise to Thee"¹ (Lauds and the remaining hours). Each of the above divisions of the Divine Office is called, in liturgical language, an *hour*, conforming to the Roman and Jewish third, sixth, and ninth hour, etc.

It is from this division of the day that the names are given to the various groups of prayers or *hours* recited daily by the priest when he reads his breviary. It is from the same source that has come the name of the service known to the laity as Sunday Vespers, and which constitutes only a portion of the Divine Office for that day. The magnificent Tenebrae services of Holy Week are nothing more than the solemn singing of the Matins and Lauds for the three days before Easter. The various hours of each day taken together constitute the Divine Office. Its recitation is called by some the *Opus Dei* (the work of God) because it is a sacred work which has God for its object.

¹ Psalm cxviii, 62 and 164.

The Divine Office is also frequently referred to as The Canonical Hours.

It is customary to classify Matins, Lauds, and Vespers as the Major Hours, and to speak of the remaining five as the Little Hours. This difference is due rather to the solemnity, length, and arrangement of the parts than to the constituent elements which, in the main, are the same for all the hours. They are, principally, the Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed and the Confiteor, psalms and canticles, antiphons, lessons and chapters, responses and verses, hymns, and finally the prayer.

The term *psalm* is of Greek origin. In classical Greek the noun *psalma* means the twang of the strings of a musical instrument. The Hebrew equivalent is derived from the verb which means "to trim," and signifies a poem of trimmed and measured form. The Greek and Hebrew words considered in relation to each other show us that by a psalm is understood, *a hymn chanted to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument*. The psalms are one hundred and fifty in number and constitute one of the books of the Old Testament. They vary in length from the two verses of the *Laudate Dominum*,² sung at the end of Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, to the one hundred and seventy-six verses of the *Beati Immaculati*,³ which tells of the virtue consisting in the love and observance of the commandments of God. The psalms are poems of the heart. Parallelism is the principle of balance. Sometimes it is a certain symmetry of clauses, lines or couplets; sometimes it is a contrast or antithesis. Homely and analogous figures are abundant and for a complete and profitable understanding of the spirituality and instruction contained in the psalms a study of Hebrew antiquities and expressions is helpful and even necessary. The author of the majority of the psalms is King David. He knew the human heart. He experienced the pitfalls of temptation and the misery of sin. He was acquainted with the glory of repentance and the tranquility of holiness. He was a man after God's own heart. Each psalm has its permeating theme and answers to a special need. It may be the plea for mercy of "a contrite and humble heart," expressed in the verses of the *Miserere*,⁴ it may be the prayer of the hopeful Christian,⁵

² Psalm cxvi.

³ Psalm cxviii.

⁴ Psalm 1, 18.

⁵ Psalm xxii, 4.

or the joy of a contented spouse of Christ.⁶ These beautiful expressions of the feelings and emotions of a religious soul render the psalms a most apt constituent of religious worship. Consequently we can understand how, when the psalmody had echoed hollow in the synagogue, it was caught up in the catacombs, preserved in the Christian temples, and filled the vaulted ceilings of mighty cathedrals.

Closely allied to the psalms are those portions of the Divine Office which are termed canticles. The name is derived from the Latin *canticulum*, the diminutive for *canticum*. It signifies a sacred song, as differentiated from a hymn and a psalm. The canticles used in the Divine Office are taken from the Old and New Testament. Those from the Old Testament are fourteen in number,⁷ and one of them occurs as the fourth psalm every day in Lauds. The three canticles from the New Testament that occur in the Divine Office are called The Evangelical Canticles, since they are all originally found in the Gospel of St. Luke. All three occur in each day's office. The *Magnificat*,⁸ the beautiful words with which the Blessed Virgin responded to the greeting of her cousin Elizabeth, is used at Vespers. The *Benedictus*,⁹ the prophecy of Zachary, forms part of Lauds, and the *Nunc Dimittis*,¹⁰ expressing holy Simeon's resignation to the Divine Will, finds a fitting place in the final hour of the day, Compline. The dignity and prominence of The Evangelical Canticles are emphasized by the fact that chorally they are said or sung standing to show the importance of the mystery of the Incarnation to which they refer. The list of canticles used in the breviary also includes the *Quicumque Vult*, or Creed of St. Athanasius, a summary of Catholic dogma, and the *Te Deum*, a canticle of joy and thanksgiving, which is also sung on many solemn occasions.

Another constituent element of the Divine Office is the antiphon. By an antiphon is now understood one or more psalm verses varying in sentiment according to the spirit of the season, or one or more sentences giving an insight into the life of the saint whose feast is celebrated or an explanation of a sacred

⁶ Psalm lxxxiii, 2.

⁷ Daniel, iii, 57-88 and 56; iii, 52-57; I Par. xxix, 10-13; Tob., xiii, 1-10; Isaías, xii, 1-6; xxxviii, 10-20; xlvi, 15-26; Judith, xvi, 15-21; I Kings, ii, 1-10; Jer. xxxi, 10-14; Exod., xv, 1-19; Hab. iii, 1-19; Eccles. xxxvi, 1-16; Deut. xxxii, 1-43.

⁸ Luke, i, 46-55.

⁹ Luke, i, 68-79.

¹⁰ Luke, ii, 29-32.

mystery commemorated on a particular day. Antiphons are of two general kinds: first, those which are recited before or after each psalm or group of psalms and express the fundamental thought of the psalm and indicate its liturgical and mystical meaning with regard to the feast; secondly, those used in connection with the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus* and which indicate the dominant sentiment of each particular office. In addition there are special antiphons, such as the *Salve Regina* and the *Regina Coeli*.

The Divine Office from the very beginning has always been grouped around the recitation of the psalms, the reading of the Sacred Scriptures or lessons, and the saying of prayers. This arrangement of the religious service was carried over from the Jewish synagogue and adapted to the spirit of Christianity. The Christians read not only the Old Testament but also their own proper Scriptures which included the history of the life of Christ, or Gospels, the Epistles, or letters of the Apostles to the various Christian communities, and, at an early date, the Acts of the Martyrs, and later the writings of the Fathers. Tertullian narrates that the Church "combines the Law and the Prophets with the Gospels and Apostolic letters" in her public readings. We learn from St. Justin Martyr that at first the amount to be read was not definite and fixed, but that the reader, having started at the appointed place, continued until he was interrupted by the bishop or head of the assembly by some invocation, such as "Thou, O Lord, have mercy on us," with which each lesson of the Divine Office is now concluded.

"Just as the psalter was to be gone through once a week, the Bible was to be read through in the course of a year, along with the commentaries of the principal Fathers. Such was the underlying principle, and its application was not difficult, taking the length of the lections into consideration, . . . fifteen or twenty chapters being read during the winter nights."¹¹ In time, the number and length of the lessons to be read was shortened and became fixed and determined so that now either three or nine lessons are read according to the dignity of the feast. By reason of their nature they may be classified as current scripture, sermon, and homily. The lessons of the first nocturn, or watch, are called current scripture because they are always excerpts from either the Old or New Testament arranged for a particular

¹¹ Dom Jules Baudot, *The Roman Breviary* (St. Louis, 1909), p. 78.

day in the liturgical year. In these lessons can be recognized a vestige of the earlier custom of reading the entire Bible within each year. Nowadays the chief books of the Bible, excepting the Gospels and the psalms, are begun and continued for a time.

The sermon—or the lessons of the second nocturn—is for the most part extracted from the commentaries of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church or from papal documents, or narrates the history and virtues of the saint commemorated.¹² They connect the Church of the early centuries with the living, thriving Church of today, for in them are found, not only the writings of antiquity, but the recent accounts of the newly canonized saints of the age.

The lessons of the third nocturn of Matins open with the reading of the first few sentences of the Gospel that is read in the Mass of that day. This reading of a fragment of the Gospel is followed by an explanatory and interpretative homily. The homilies are taken from the writings and commentaries of the Fathers and Doctors. For this reason they give an insight into the antiquity and progress of Catholic dogma and excite an admiration for the religious fervor and mystical depth of the early Christians.

Thus far we have spoken only of the lessons as they occur in Matins. They are found, but in much briefer form, in the other hours and are styled capitula or chapters. They are often from the same source as the Epistle. Some are of a dogmatic nature, as "Christ rising from the dead, dieth now no more. Death shall no more have dominion over him. For in that he died to sin, he died once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God"; others are rather more descriptive and devotional.

Each lesson of Matins and the chapters of the other hours are followed by a response. At an earlier date the response consisted in the chanting of an entire psalm by the cantor and in the repetition by the people of one of the verses or last words of the verse much the same as in Psalm cxxxv, where the response, "for his mercy endureth forever," is chanted after each verse. In the present arrangement of the breviary only one verse is used. And sometimes the doxology is inserted. Thus in Prime: "Jesus Christ, Thou Son of the Living God, have

¹² In the Divine Office according to the Dominican Rite, the Epistles, especially those of St. Paul, play an important part in the composition of the second lessons of the Sunday Office.

mercy on us. *Response.* Jesus Christ, Thou Son of the Living God, have mercy on us. *Verse.* Thou that sitteth at the right hand of the Father. *Response.* Have mercy on us. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. *Response.* Jesus Christ, Thou Son of the Living God, have mercy on us." Following some antiphons, hymns, and certain responses there occurs a single verse or versicle, as "Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God." *Response.* "That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ." The Alleluia, or cry of joy, is also used in connection with the response and the versicle.

In each hour there is a group of poetic verses known as the hymn. The hymns of the Little Hours remain substantially the same throughout the year, but they vary in the Major Hours according to the spirit of the season and the nature of the feast. St. Hilary of Poitiers was the first to write Latin hymns, but St. Ambrose is regarded as the father of hymnody in the West. Hymns were written to spread true Catholic doctrine and to counteract the popular heretical songs. His style was imitated and all hymns of that type are known as Ambrosian. St. Benedict, however, is recognized as the first one to have made the hymn an integral part of the Canonical Hours. The hymns of the breviary form a real anthology and in some instances are masterpieces. The *O Salutaris* and the *Tantum Ergo*, sung during Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament are the concluding stanzas of the hymns in Lauds and Vespers, respectively, for the Feast of Corpus Christi. Of all the breviary hymns the most widely used outside the recitation of the Divine Office are probably the *Veni Creator Spiritus*, the *Ave Maris Stella*, and the *Vexilla Regis*.

There remains only one more element of the Divine Office to be considered, namely, the prayer or collect, which comes at the close of each canonical hour. It is of entirely different construction from the other parts of the Divine Office. It is addressed directly to God. It is supplicatory in nature and sums up the whole spirit of a particular office. It is preceded by the invocation *Dominus Vobiscum*. At the time of the introduction of the prayer into the religious service there was no set wording for each feast and the prayer was improvised by the bishop or the one presiding over the assembly. About as early as the fourth century, however, set prayers were provided

for those who were not capable of improvising. Today the prayer to be used on any particular feast is fixed and indicated.

In its primitive form the Divine Office is traceable to the early days of the Church. Most liturgical authors see in Matins an amplification of the *vigil* service which consisted in the singing of psalms, the reading of the Scriptures, and the recitation of prayers, participated in by both the clergy and the laity. Lauds is regarded as corresponding to the service held at dawn, and it seems certain that by the end of the fourth century, with the exception of Compline, the remaining hours of the Canonical Office were celebrated much the same as they are today. Compline was, in the beginning, a purely monastic service, the origin of which is attributed to St. Benedict. But with subsequent changes this last prayer of the day and preparation for the night has become "one of the most beautiful creations of Christian genius."¹³

While the monks did not originate the Divine Office, they made the solemn recitation of it their principal work and organized and regulated it. In the thirteenth century, a new form of religious life sprang into existence. The members of these organizations were, not monks, but friars, who combined the active with the contemplative life. Among this new religious offspring were the Friars Preacher. It was demanded of them that they be learned, in order to refute the heretics, but before all else that they be spiritual men. St. Dominic, their founder, realized that the Choral Office, "when chanted measuredly, makes the character unconsciously grave and decorus, gives it opportunity for prolonged contemplation of the mysteries and words of God, and affords it that food for daily sustenance which has nowadays to be provided in the form of set meditation. In those days, to lay and cleric, the Divine Office and sacred sacrifice completed the fullness of the matter of the spiritual life."¹⁴ The daily chanting of the entire Office prevails in the convents of the Friars Preacher down to the present day as a sacred and grave obligation. To some a most striking feature of the Choral Office, according to the Dominican Rite, is the solemn singing of the antiphon *Salve Regina* daily after Compline, when the Friars leave the choir and march in procession through the

¹³ Abbot Fernand Cabrol, O. S. B., *Liturgical Prayer: Its History and Spirit* (New York, 1922), p. 148.

¹⁴ Bede Jarrett, O. P., *Life of St. Dominic* (London, 1924), p. 104.

church of the laity. At the entreaty, "Turn, then, Most Gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us," all kneel and are sprinkled with holy water. There is a tradition that at this time the Mother of God throws herself at the feet of her Son, praying for the preservation of the entire Dominican Order.

The Middle Ages furnished a period of high liturgical conception and development. The twentieth century has been characterized as The Layman's Age, and an attempt is being made to turn the light of the Church's golden years to shine upon the souls of the laity of today. Within recent years there has been an effort to make the prayers of the liturgy better known and more generally used among the laity. Translations of the missal have been made into almost every modern language, and the layman has been enabled to assist at the Holy Sacrifice with more attention and devotion. The next step in the liturgical movement is to popularize the breviary and bring to the attention of the laity a rich storehouse of precious spiritual treasures, a collection of prayers useful to the individual and to the Church at large, an odor of incense to rise to the throne of God and draw down temporal and spiritual blessings on the world.

