

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TENEBRAE ACCORDING TO THE DOMINICAN RITE

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## I



RELIGIOUS worship not only implies a general mental attitude of reverence and adoration, but also seeks to enlist the emotions, and to coordinate them in the four distinctive acts of religious worship,—adoration, propitiation, thanksgiving and supplication. It demands furthermore that these be manifested publicly.

The liturgy of the Church is her fulfillment of the divinely imposed duty of public worship. The manifold rites, ceremonies and prayers that compose it, are the official expressions of the Church's recognition of the human need of the divine, and of the divine demand for human recognition.

The tragedy of Calvary, through the medium of the liturgy, is brought before us with a vividness and actuality that surpasses that of the current events of the day. The last days of Jesus are reflected therein as in a mirror. The ceremonies of Holy Week are not intended to be merely commemorative or historical; they are strictly speaking representative. The usual tone of joy and gladness is now almost entirely suppressed; the Church puts herself in mourning, as though her Spouse were now undergoing His cruel fate; she weeps over Jerusalem, as if the measure of her iniquity were not yet filled up, and the punishment which has overtaken her might yet be averted. In her official prayer, the Divine Office, the Spouse of Christ, in her night of loneliness, invites her children to weep with her. The ceremonies, on these three days before Easter, are intended to increase their devotion to Christ's Passion, to soften their hearts long-hardened by mundane affairs so that the spirit of penance may bow forth. Since this portion of the liturgy of Holy Week has a unique interest of its own, it might be well to narrate something of its history.

## II

Various explanations have been given for the name of this Office. Some, because it was formerly celebrated at midnight, see in it an allusion to Christ ceasing to walk openly with the Jews; others see it as symbolic of grief and mourning. Another explanation, suggested perhaps by the occurrence of the word "Tenebrae" in the text of the Office for Good Friday, is that it is derived from the eclipse of the sun during the three hours of Christ's Agony on Calvary; or from the desolation and abandonment endured by Christ in His Passion; or from the total deprivation of the Jews of the light of the faith when they put our Saviour to death.

What is Tenebrae? Tenebrae is the Matins and Lauds of the last three days of Holy Week. The liturgical day is divided into seven parts, watches or canonical hours, the first of which is composed of Matins, morning song, and Lauds, the song of praise. The usual time for the recitation of this first canonical hour was either shortly after midnight, or between midnight and sunrise. In primitive times when this Office was chanted at midnight, a practice still observed by some religious orders, the faithful were wont to spend the greater portion of these Holy Week nights in assisting at it. The Church however, recognizing that such an arrangement would be inconvenient, and anxious that her children should not lose such a spiritual aid, eventually permitted these Offices to be sung on the preceding evening, in order that the laity might participate. Consequently the Tenebrae service of Holy Thursday is chanted Wednesday afternoon or evening, and a similar anticipation is made for the other two days.

The Office of Tenebrae, when compared with that recited during other liturgical seasons, is considerably modified. All the introductory formularies and benedictions, the invitatory and the hymns, and in fact, whatever else the Church makes use of on other occasions to express joy and gladness, are omitted. Nothing is left but Psalms, Antiphons, Lessons and Responsories. There is a marked similarity between the Tenebrae and the Office of the Dead, in which the Church, expressing grief and mourning, suppresses the hymns, the blessings at the Lessons, and the *Gloria* at the end of the psalms.

Matins is divided, even in this Office, according to the usual practice of three main groups of "Nocturns," each of which contains three psalms with their antiphons, and three lessons with their responsories.

The first Nocturns contain the Lamentations of Jeremias the Prophet and will be mentioned later.

The Lessons of the second Nocturn for Holy Thursday are taken from the Sermon of Saint Leo the Great on the Passion, and with the holy Doctor, we assist at the Last Supper. On Good Friday, he narrates the seizure of the Saviour and His arraignment by the Jews. On Holy Saturday we have Saint Augustine's commentary on the seventh verse of the sixty-third psalm, *Man shall come to a deep heart: and God shall be exalted*, which the saint ingeniously applies to the suffering and triumphant Christ.

The Lessons of the third Nocturn for Holy Thursday are taken from the homily of Saint John Chrysostom in which he tells of the betrayal of Judas, and warns us to approach the Holy Sacrament "with fitting reverence and watchfulness. Let no Judas be there." Saint Leo, in the third lessons of the Office of Good Friday, again recalls the perfidy of the Jews in his Sermon on the Passion, and on Holy Saturday bids the spiritual Christian to rejoice "now that our Saviour's triumph is accomplished."

The responsories which follow each of the nine lessons are most appropriate. They represent a very ancient form of prayer and possess a simple, stately beauty suggestive of the ancient classical tragedies. These little dramatic poems, pathetic yet powerful, have been called "the soul of the Tenebrae services." The religious feeling that they express produces a most solemn impression.

### III

The Lamentations of Jeremias the Prophet are sung as the lessons of the first Nocturn of each Tenebrae. Sung in a melody whose few notes and variations depend on the pauses and terminations of the text, these constantly recurring themes "monotonous, poignant, yet almost caressing," throb with sorrow. The Lamentations, bewailing the destruction and captivity of the Jewish people, plunge us into the very depths of mourning, for the destruction over which Jeremias pours forth his inspired sadness is but a figure of a more terrible one to come.

The Lamentations begin with the recital of the title, *Incipit Lamentatio*, and the Hebrew letter *Aleph*. Each succeeding verse is introduced by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and each Lamentation concludes with the same strophe, *Jerusalem, Jerusalem*.<sup>1</sup> Let

<sup>1</sup>The words Aleph, Beth, etc., are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The original is a kind of acrostic, the first word in each verse beginning with a

us take for example the second verse of the second Lamentation and the responsory found in the Matins of Holy Saturday.

Vau. And the iniquity of the daughter of my people is made greater than the sin of Sodom, which was overthrown in a moment, and hands took nothing in her.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, be converted to the Lord thy God.

*Responsory.* Mourn, O Jerusalem, and put off thy vesture of gladness: put on sackcloth and ashes:\* For in thee was slain the Savior of Israel.

*Verse.* Make thy tears flow as a torrent day and night: and let not the pupil of thine eye be still.

*Answer.* For in thee was slain the Savior of Israel.

After the ninth lesson in the Matins of Holy Saturday, a portion of the Prayer of Jeremias is sung, with a chant distinctively appropriate, a melody expressive of the most fervent supplication and profound sorrow. The Prayer gives us a faithful, but terrible description of the miseries endured by the Jewish people after they had committed the crime of Deicide. The responsory which follows it might be considered as the epitome of Christian teaching.

*Responsory.* Christ the Lamb of God was sacrificed for the salvation of the world: for with pity our Creator saw His noble work transgress His law, when our parents rashly ate the fatal tree's forbidden meat: He then resolved the cross' wood,\* Should make that wood's sad damage good.

*Verse.* Full thirty years were freely spent, in this our mortal banishment: and then the Son of Man decreed, for the lost sons of men to bleed: and on the cross a victim laid, the solemn expiation made.

*Answer.* Should make that wood's sad damage good.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV

It might be well to note here some of the external features of the Tenebrae. Though not numerous, they nevertheless have a sig-

successive letter of the alphabet. In the original Hebrew, these Lamentations, like some of the psalms, are alphabetical poems, in which the beginning with a letter is a part of the rule which governs the verse. As this peculiarity could not be preserved in a translation, the letter is retained alone to indicate the nature of the original arrangement.

<sup>2</sup>The translations of the responsories given above have been taken from the *Office of Holy Week According to the Dominican Rite*, which contains the entire ritual for Holy Week, in both English and Latin.

nificant rôle in this liturgical service. In the sanctuary before the main altar there is a large, triangular candelabrum, called the Tenebrae hearse. The name *hearse* is a corrupted derivation from the term *herpex*, a harrow, the idea of which was suggested seemingly by the spiky points of the prickets upon which the candles were fixed.<sup>3</sup> This candelabrum, containing fifteen candles of unbleached wax, is lighted, together with the six candles on the altar, shortly before the recitation of the Divine Office. The triangular form of the candelabrum is said to represent the Blessed Trinity, the candles, the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Law. At the conclusion of each psalm, these candles are extinguished one by one, nine in Matins and five in Lauds, and the last one at the *Benedictus*. The extinction of the lights, according to Amalarius, signifies the sorrow in the hearts of the disciples while Christ lay in the sepulchre; according to others, the Jews in putting Christ to death deprived themselves of the light of faith.

While the fifth psalm of Lauds is being chanted, the six candles on the altar as well as all the other lights in the church are extinguished, so that with the intonation of the canticle *Benedictus*, when the candle at the apex of the candelabrum is extinguished, a total darkness, symbolizing the end of the agony of Christ, prevails.

## V

With the conclusion of the *Benedictus* antiphon begins one of the most touching and impressive of all the ceremonies in the Dominican ritual. This rite, which is not used in the modern Roman practice, is found in the Sacrum Ordinal of about 1210, and Saint Aethelwold, in the *Concordia Regularis*, written before the year 1000, mentions a ceremonial substantially identical.

Before the steps of the main altar stand two cantors, who sing in a tone of poignant sadness: *Kyrie eleison*. Three times, alternately with the Choir, they make the supplication, Lord have mercy on us!

Two other cantors, standing in the middle of the choir, take up the chant: Have mercy, O Lord. And the entire Choir responds: Christ the Lord became obedient even unto death.

The cantors at the foot of the altar beseech: Thou Who didst come to suffer for us.

The Choir answers: Christ have mercy upon us.

<sup>3</sup> Thurston, Herbert S.J. *Lent and Holy Week*, p. 258.

The cantors proclaim: Who, with Thine arms outstretched upon the Cross, hast drawn all ages to Thyself.

Choir: Christ have mercy upon us.

Cantors: Who saidst in prophecy: O death, I will be thy death.

Choir: Christ have mercy upon us.

And the two cantors in the middle of the choir respond: Have mercy, O Lord; the Choir repeating: Christ the Lord became obedient even unto death.

Once more the *Kyrie* is said alternately, the cantors in the choir repeat, Have mercy, O Lord, and the Choir replies, Christ the Lord became obedient even unto death.

Then the two before the altar, as though they were standing at the foot of the Cross, and the awful significance of the moment had suddenly become apparent to them, cry in a high tone, "Even to the death of the Cross." Immediately all prostrate themselves, there are a few moments of absolute stillness, and then in a hushed tone the psalm *Miserere* is said, a final plea made, "Look down, we beseech Thee, O Lord, on this Thy family, for which our Lord Jesus Christ did not refuse to be delivered into the hands of the wicked, and to endure the torment of the Cross," and the *Tenebrae* service is over.

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