

## BRIEFLY AND SUCCINCTLY

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Lest the friars lose devotion and their study be in the least way impeded, this chant (of our Order) should be done briefly and succinctly, but with a pause in the middle of the verse, without hurrying or confusion, and more solemnly on feast days; always without discord and octave singing.

The same rules are also to be observed in the recitation of the divine office.  
—Constitutions O.P., No. 573.



HIS CONSTITUTION has always been a source of much discussion in our Order. The reason is that the precise meaning of "briefly and succinctly" has never been fully determined. It is too relative. An attempt was made recently, however, by one of our Spanish brethren<sup>1</sup> to throw some light on this interesting topic. He did not attempt to solve the problem completely; he desired only to give some of the historical background of the times in which our Holy Father St. Dominic lived, and thereby to show what prompted him to lay down this rule. When we realize that the establishing of this norm was a reaction against the excessively long and tedious monastic observances of the Middle Ages, it may help us to have a clearer concept of the meaning of "briefly and succinctly" as applied to our liturgy, especially the Office. We will not, of course, solve the problem, but we will see what St. Dominic saw in the monasteries of his time. That was definitely what he did *not* want in his Order.

### THE IDEAL OF THE ORDER

When St. Dominic began his apostolate there were no friars as such. The contemplative life was found only in abbeys and monasteries; the active life was carried out in the parishes, schools and hospitals. If he was to have an Order of men who would be both contemplative and active, he would have to form it himself. From his experience in the heresy-stricken parts of France, he saw the need of an Order of preachers and teachers. From his years as a canon in the cathedral of Osma, he knew that such an Order would not produce fruit for the Church unless this preaching and teaching were

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<sup>1</sup> Fray Andreas M. Conchado. This present article has been adapted from his "Breviter et Succincte . . ." in *Levantinas*, no. 90, Oct., 1949.

the overflow from a life of contemplation. So this was his dream, the dream of a genius, which slowly but surely came into organized being. St. Dominic first considered the end of the Order—preaching and teaching. Everything was to be subordinated to this end. He especially insisted on two particular means to this end: study and the solemn recitation of the Divine Office in choir. Unlike the monk, whose whole daily life was centered on the liturgy, the friar would be concerned with the liturgy for only a part of the day. Also unlike the monk, who spent his time outside of choir in some form of manual labor, the friar would be constantly devoting himself to the study of sacred doctrine in order to preach more effectively.

But there was a problem, and a serious one. If his friars were to recite or chant the Office as was done in the monasteries of the time, they would be in choir most of the day, and there would be no time left for preaching and study. For two hundred years previous to this time, there had been a great development in the liturgical life of the monk. Not only were there many new feasts instituted, but also the amount of time spent in choral chanting was more and more prolonged. The Divine Office was the central point of the monastic life; this had already been fixed by St. Benedict. But now it became so important as to be the only reason for the existence of the monastery. One abbot is said to have remarked, "You have the choir and the refectory, what more do you need?" Also, as manual labor was being abandoned as inappropriate to the dignity of the priest, the monks dedicated themselves solely to the contemplative life, giving birth to the pompous services and the long Divine Office. Close to six hours were spent each day in the chanting of the Office alone. Matins, for instance, took one hour and a half; the other hours were correspondingly long. In the winter, before the nocturns, three psalms were sung, divided into ten sections; in the summer five, divided into three parts. In addition to these psalms, we are told, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin was presently added; and in some monasteries, even the Office of All Saints, or of St. Benedict, or St. Columbanus. Aside from these Offices, they also used to recite the Penitential Psalms, the Litanies of the Saints, or other special prayers—all of which naturally contributed to the prolongation of the Office and to making it more wearisome. And there was one thing more—the greater solemnity of the chant!

There were several types of chant, but two of these must be mentioned here. One form of chanting was called the "tract" chant, in which the cantors would sing short phrases of the psalm and the choir, in between the pauses which were made, would meditate on

what had just been sung. Another, the "direct" chant, consisted in the alternating of the verses by the two choirs, as is done today. In the days of St. Dominic, however, there was a tendency to lengthen the endings, protracting the final sound, and thus prolonging the whole phrase.

This was only a custom, but it was followed in all monasteries. Its weight, however, began to tell on the monks. In 1118 the Canons of Springirbach petitioned Pope Gelasius II to suppress the part of the Rule which dealt with the Divine Office as being impossible to carry out in practice. The Holy Father acceded: "We command . . . that the celebrations of the offices be observed among you according to the common custom of the Catholic Church." We are told that, as the difficulty expressed by the German Canons Regular was universal, the papal letter, without the individuating characteristics, was spread abroad, probably through private initiative, until the institution became quite general.

#### DOMINICAN LITURGY

Such a prolonged mode of chanting was obviously incompatible with preaching and teaching, since the friars would have neither time nor ambition for such work after so many hours spent in choir. Thus it happened that St. Dominic, unwilling to give up such an excellent means of obtaining God's blessings, decided to retain the choral recitation of the Divine Office—with this "revolutionary" condition, that it was always to be recited briefly and succinctly. Perhaps because the travelling friars stayed at monasteries they tended to forget the admonition of their Father, and so we find it being continually brought to the attention of the Order during the first few years of its existence.

It took quite a while for the whole Dominican liturgy to become organized and unified. When St. Dominic dispersed his first sons, he did not determine any particular breviary for their use. He did give, certainly, a copy of the Rule and Constitutions to each group, and he recommended that they associate themselves with the liturgy of the place in which they lived. He was anxious only that they should not forget that the recitation of the Office in choir was merely a means to the end of the Order, and not an end in itself.

Gradually there grew the "many varieties in the Office," mentioned by the early histories of the Order. The friars, when they came to the General Chapters, could not sing the psalms together in choir, for each capitular father carried the breviary of his diocese. This was the reason for St. Dominic's further plan to unify the liturgy. He

adopted the Breviary of the Roman Basilicas as his own. But this plan was not definitive. In the course of time lack of uniformity again prevailed—which obliged him to revise the Breviary. Blessed Humbert, the fifth Master of the Order, tells us how this was done :

You must realize that from the beginning of the Order there was a great variety in the Office ; and so there was composed one Office in order to have uniformity everywhere. In the course of time, it was committed to four friars from four provinces to arrange it better. This they did, and their arrangement was confirmed. But because there were still some things which needed correction, there was another commission of three approved by the Master of the Order. This is therefore the Office of which the constitution is here speaking.

For this reason the Order, almost from the beginning, had a liturgy of its own, which would be perfected later on (from the General Chapter of Bologna in 1244 to that of Paris in 1256) until it became changed into what is called "The Dominican Rite."

#### BRIEFLY AND SUCCINCTLY

Blessed Humbert of Romans wrote at length on the Office of the Church. In explaining the command, "Let all Hours in the Church be said briefly and succinctly in such a way that the friars will not lose devotion, and their study will be least impeded," he says :

It must be realized that from the prolonging of the Divine Office many inconveniences follow : loathing for the choir ; injury to the health of the friars ; mental fatigue, which almost all incur ; deforming of the Office, and impeding of other goods. Still, there are very useful things among the other benefits, and the prolonging of the Office impedes each of them, viz. devotion and study, which are especially concerned here.

From this it is quite evident that the fourth successor of St. Dominic was well aware of the proportion of means to the end of the Order, and he continually impressed this on the minds of the friars.

#### PSALMODY AND STUDY

Study is the principal cause of the abbreviation of the liturgical chant. In a certain sense, study, too, is an end, and the chant is to be subordinated to it. As "monks consecrated to the instruction of souls in doctrine," the Dominicans must dedicate themselves to the knowledge of the divine and human sciences. For this reason they cannot consecrate their whole life to contemplation ; their object is "to give to others the fruits of their contemplation." In what way is study preferred to prayer ? Blessed Humbert replies :

Study here is not preferred to prayer, but to the prolonging of prayer. A short Office with prayer is better than a prolonged Office with an impeding of study, because of the great utility of study in many ways. Since, therefore, the threefold devotion mentioned above is so useful, and study is so useful, it was rightly established as *briefly*, i.e. not in an excessively fastidious manner, as do certain religious; *succinctly*, i.e. without tails of prolongations, as some are accustomed to do in terminations or pauses.

The Dominicans, then, study in order to preach and teach well. And they chant the Office briefly and succinctly so that they may have time for study. But in what does this "briefly and succinctly" consist? Our Holy Father Dominic was not entirely original in the *fixing* of the canonical office; it was one of the ordinations which he took from the Premonstratensians. He ordered the solemn recitation of the Divine Office, as was then the custom. However, while taking over many of the "customs" of Premontre, he gave them a special modality which was to be proper to his own Order. Other complementary articles were added to facilitate the attaining of the end of the Order. The Dominican ought to study day and night, at home and away from home; and to facilitate the task of study, the choral Office should be executed rapidly. But, how rapidly? It was here that St. Dominic's genius for harmonizing shows itself, in uniting the liturgical prolongations with the apostolic life of the Order.

The gradual psalms, which were recited before the nocturns, were reduced to five for all time, and were said only on Saturdays, when the Votive Office of the Blessed Virgin was recited, and in place of the Little Office, which was omitted on that day. The daily Office of the Dead (not the weekly, which was obligatory) was restricted to: "without note in choir by the hebdomadarian and the ministers of the week, or by those who are assigned for this." St. Dominic followed the same criterion in abbreviating the rest of the prayers, psalms, litanies, etc. In our liturgy, too, the friars were commanded to say the "tract" without mediations in every phrase—briefly; and the psalmody "without tails of protractions," but always making the due pauses so as to avoid confusion—succinctly.

#### PSALMODY AND DEVOTION

Blessed Humbert adds another reason for the abbreviation of the Divine Office: devotion. He distinguishes a twofold devotion. There is a certain devotion relative to the Office itself, when the Office is said with devotion externally; another is that to which the friars usually devote themselves after the Office, spending the time in meditations and private prayers. With respect to the former devotion, he

speaks of those who chant the Divine Office without devotion, "from habit only, and without any sense of understanding," and he begs that they do it "not only from custom, but also with understanding, with affection, joyfully, maturely, humbly, freely." Regarding the latter devotion he wrote very much more. It was his intention that the friars should give as much time as possible to this devotion, but he reminded them that their prior obligation was to study. For the friar study is a form of prayer, since it is ordered to a holy end: preaching and teaching sacred doctrine.

The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that the friar is always to remember that he is a friar and not a monk, that for him the liturgy is only a very holy means to a holy end, that by using the means properly, in the way intended by his Holy Father Dominic, he cannot but produce fruit. If he feels the need of greater devotion than is provided by the choral recitation of the Divine Office, then he may use other time for private devotions, provided it does not detract from his application to study. Otherwise he will cease to be a friar.