

## TENEBRAE, THE OFFICE OF THE THREE DAYS BEFORE EASTER

David, the Royal Prophet, could boast: "Seven times a day have I given praise to Thee." From the earliest days of Christianity, monks, nuns, friars and priests of God have interspersed labor and study with prayer by assembling seven times every twenty-four hours to chant, through their office, the praises of God. The Church's "official prayer" as the Divine Office is often called, or the "work of God," as her monks of old spoke of it, is adapted throughout the liturgical year to the varying moods of men. Thus Advent is a time of expectation; Lent of reparation; Holy Week of lamentation. In commemorating the awful tragedy of Christ's sacrifice, wherein He died a bleeding victim for our sins, it is not unfitting that the morning office, so joyous at other times, should be called by the Latin name—Tenebrae—darkness. For the Spouse of Christ is in the night of loneliness, she is weeping, and she invites her children to join with her in this purifying sorrow. Her ceremonial, therefore, is intended on the three days before Easter, to increase their devotion to Christ's passion, to draw out their sympathies, to break through their hearts, long hardened by worldly cares, that the spirit of penitence may pour forth.

Tenebrae is the Matins of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, that is, the morning song or the first canonical hour in the Divine Office of those days. The liturgical day is divided into seven watches or canonical hours: Matins and Lauds from midnight to six; Prime from six to nine; Terce from nine to twelve; None from three to six; Vespers from six to nine; Compline from nine to midnight. Matins, or the morning song, immediately followed by Lauds, the song of praise, were chanted in the early days between midnight and sunrise. Later they were chanted on the preceding evening. Accordingly the Tenebrae service of Holy Thursday is held on Wednesday afternoon or evening and a similar anticipation is made for the other two days.

This beautiful morning prayer called Matins is usually divided into three main parts called Nocturns. Each Nocturn is made up of three psalms, three lessons, each psalm being followed by the doxology and an antiphon, which is usually a verse from the psalm. The lessons are followed by a responsory made

up of an antiphon and a versicle, so called because all in reciting it face the altar, "versus altare." The lessons of the first nocturn are usually taken from Holy Scripture; those of the second nocturn narrate the life of a saint, if the office of a saint is being said; otherwise extracts from the writings of the Fathers are used. The lessons of the third nocturn consist of a homily on the Gospel by one of the Fathers. Matins begin with "the Invitatory Psalm" followed by a hymn and it is closed with the Te Deum. Lauds, which are counted a part of Matins, are usually made up of five psalms, a hymn and the canticle of Zachary called the "Benedictus." Each psalm is likewise followed by the Gloria and an antiphon; the hymn is followed by a versicle, and the Benedictus by an antiphon. Lauds end with a prayer. This prayer like the antiphons and lessons, is always adapted to the feast or season.

All this makes up a glorious chorus of praise and blessing to the Giver of all good things in thanksgiving for His favors to men. But this usually joyous character of Matins is wanting in the Tenebrae. The psalms of happiness are displaced by those of penitence. The lessons are in keeping with the psalms; those of the first nocturn being the Lamentations of Jeremias. All of the Glorias after the psalms are omitted. No Benediction is either asked for or received by the reader of lessons; no "Oremus" is pronounced to ask the united prayers of the congregation; nor is the "Dominus Vobiscum" said as it is at other times, to bless all present. All these omissions declare the Church's concern and trouble for the sufferings of Christ and her total distraction in His sorrows. Her utterances and her silence denote the depth of her affliction.

Before the Tenebrae begins six candles are lighted on the altar. At the Epistle side is placed a triangular candelabrum to typify the fundamental Christian dogma, the Blessed Trinity. On the apex is set a white candle representing Christ. On each side of the incline are set seven tallow candles to symbolize the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Law who enlightened the World for a while and then paled at the approach of the Messiah the Sun of Justice.

During the Office all the candles are extinguished, one after each of the fourteen psalms, except the white one, which at the end is removed for a time behind the altar and afterwards, still lighted, is replaced at the apex of the candelabrum. This put-

ting out of the fourteen candles one by one signifies that the Jews in putting Christ to death were totally deprived of the light of faith. During the Benedictus, the six lighted candles on the altar are extinguished to recall the death of the precursor, who was the last to give testimony of the Messiah. The white candle left burning removed and concealed for a while and then restored, signifies that Jesus Christ, being the Light of the World, died according to His humanity and was laid in the tomb; yet He lived according to His divinity, and after three days raised His body to life. This extinguishing of the candles is meant to convey the impressions of darkness, dismay and mourning. The pathetic strain in which the Tenebrae is sung reveals the convulsive affliction of Mother Church in this climax of the penitential season.

At the close of the Office the clerics bow to earth in sorrow and subjection reciting in a low tone the penitential psalm, the "Miserere." After this a clapping noise is made to commemorate the noise of the rocks that quaked at the awful moment of the death of Christ. It is then that the white candle is restored to its place at the apex of the triangular candelabrum. The Church is again lighted; all depart in silence.

One cannot witness this dramatic recitation of the Office of the Tenebrae without sharing the feelings of its participants. One's sympathies are attuned to the momentous events and stupendous mysteries which effected the redemption of mankind. For Christ's sacrifice of atonement was made, not amidst verdant scenes, not in the victorious atmosphere of peaceful nature like that of Thabor, the mountain of glory. It began in the shadowy depth of Gethsemane, continued amid the ignominious hootings of a hating rabble, and ended on the barren hillock of Calvary. Here amidst the convulsions of nature, the veil of the Temple was torn in twain, rocks were riven, the sun hid its light and the dead, a gruesome spectacle, rose, to contribute their testimony to that of the Centurion, "Truly this is the Son of God!"

Attendance at the Tenebrae is always of profit; and the ceremonials of the Church never carried out in vain if they are properly understood. Devotion to the crucified Saviour is increased; one is encouraged to remain at the foot of the cross until the end of the Good Friday tragedy. One's heart is prepared for an increase of grace that fortifies against the terrors of death.

—Bro. Aloysius McLaughlin, O. P.