

MARY'S SEVEN JEWELS—HER HOURS

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MARY is the Mother of God. With this beautiful thought as a fillip saints have outdone one another in composing refrains of ineffable praise in honor of their loving Mother. She, who is as it were, "the dream of God come true" is the Mother par excellence. It is to her as she kneels by the crib that the mind's faltering eye necessarily turns for some fathoming of the profound mystery of the Incarnation. As St. Augustine exclaims: "She is the form or expression of God, something like God put within our reach." Through her, a human creature, rays of revealing light inundate weak human intellects. Through her these intellects are aided in grasping, in some halting manner, the sublimity of the God Man in the manger.

"Puer natus est nobis et filius datus est nobis." A Child is born to us and a Son is given to us. Repeatedly, the Church exultingly sings this refrain in the Office and Mass of Christmas Day. The undercurrent of a corresponding: *"Mater datus est nobis"* is unexpressed; yet though not expressed in these very words, this sentiment is manifested in many other forms. In honoring the Son, the Church always has given an unequalled place of honor to the Mother. Well does the Mystical Spouse of Christ know that Mary's exalted beauty comes from her proximity to the Source of all perfection. "Because," as St. Bernard says, "there was nothing on earth more worthy of Him than her virginal womb," the Son of the Virgin desires to have her glories sung along with His own. For centuries, one special devotion in the Church's Liturgy has excelled in this special praise given to the Mother of God. This praise is the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

THE DIVINE OFFICE IN THE LITURGY

The Mass is the crown of Christian worship. The liturgy itself embraces those modes of worship endorsed by the Church of Christ as its official prayer. In the words of Dom Festigière, the liturgy is the "method authentically instituted by the Church to make souls like unto Jesus."¹ About the Mass, the crown of the Liturgy, various other

¹ *La Liturgie Catholique*, Maredsous, 1913, p. 119.

forms of worship cluster as a setting of jewels. The Divine Office holds the position of prominence among all these other liturgical prayers. Composed as they are divinely, the words of the psalms, antiphons, and versicles of the Divine Office have ever outshone the other gems of worship. On this point, the holy Pontiff Pius X, quoting St. Augustine, wrote: "That God might be praised in a fitting manner by man, God Himself composed the praises of Himself. And because God deigned to praise Himself, man found the terms in which to sound God's praises."²

In the sublime expression characteristic of him, St. John in the fourth chapter of the Apocalypse writes of the ceremonial lauds that are rendered before the Throne of the Almighty. The Divine Office is but the union of man on earth with this heavenly choir. Again and again, the Sacred Scriptures and holy Fathers supply abundant evidence of definite appointed times for prayer. The "seven times a day I have given praise to Thee" of the Psalmist is early specifically manifested in the hours proper to communal prayer. From the morning and evening chants of the earliest Christians flowed the delineation of the present horarium of the Church's Office. In the *Apostolic Constitutions*, dating from the second or third century and often attributed to St. Clement of Rome we read: "Have prayers in the morning at the third hour (Tierce), the sixth (Sext), and the ninth (None), in the evening and at cockcrow."

The original Latin meaning of the word *officium* was "duty." Primarily, it referred to something done under obedience. All liturgical prayer, fittingly enough, headed by the Divine Office, must be a setting for the daily sacrifice of the Divine Victim of Calvary, the sacrifice which was itself a divine act of obedience. The Apostle of the Gentiles testifies to this: "He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross."³

Were one but to consider his rôle in this Divine Drama, now no longer as an individual, but rather as the voice of Christ's Spouse, the Church, how ardently would he strive to imitate the adorers of St. John's Apocalypse. Human nature weakens though under distractions and difficulties. Tasting of the sublime, it often seeks the mire. Yet as a member of Christ's Mystical Body man does possess an unsurpassable consolation. As long as he does not deliberately withdraw himself from his Head, the incense of praise continues to ascend heavenward. Christ prays in man. Such sentiments are eloquently

² *Divino Afflatu*.

³ Phil. 2, 8.

expressed by Père Clérissac: "If you throw yourself wholeheartedly into liturgical prayer, it cannot fail to take possession of you, body and soul. It will colour your thoughts with the varied hues of supernatural light, imbue your wills and your hearts with strength and love, and even stir your sensible faculties and your whole being."⁴

COMPOSITION AND HISTORY OF THE LITTLE OFFICE

The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin is still another gem which clusters about the crown of the liturgy, the Mass. As such the seven respective hours that make up this Office are as seven jewels belonging to Mary. "Little" is appended to the title as a sign that this particular worship is as a complement to the Great Office. Since the earliest centuries the Church has followed the individual hours of the Divine Office with those corresponding hours of the Little Office. Just as the Blessed Virgin herself has always reflected the beauty of her Divine Son, so too does the Little Office reflect the grandeur of the Divine Office. Indeed, all that pertains to the Divine Office may, in proportionate manner, be duly applied to the Office of Mary.

Concerning the composition of the Little Office no conclusive evidence can be put forth in favor of any one author. St. John Damascene (8th century) often is accredited with this task. Though such a claim cannot be substantiated, it is certain that this devoted son of Mary did recite this Office. In this century also the Benedictine Monks of the famed Monastery of Monte Cassino were bound to the recitation of the same Office. Such examples manifest the early date at which the Little Office was a part of Christian Liturgy. Mary's place of honor in the cradle of Christianity, the East, being a well attested fact, it is not unlikely that Eastern Monks were among the first to practice this devotion. By the eleventh century the entire Church was chanting the heavenly Queen's praises by means of this prayer. To St. Peter Damian of that century is given the palm for zealously fostering the Little Office. Some twenty years after this Saint's death we read of Pope Urban II obliging the clergy to the recitation of Mary's Office. At the same time the Holy Pontiff most ardently recommended this devotion to the laity.

Until the time of the Dominican Pope, St. Pius V, in the latter half of the sixteenth century, the obligation to recite this Office bound all clerics. Yet it is not to be supposed that they were the sole

⁴ Humbert Clérissac, O.P., *The Spirit of Saint Dominic*. London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, p. 67.

devotees of this devotion. The lay folk cherished it. As early as 1496, in a report written by the Secretary of the Venetian Embassy picturing life in England it is related: "They all hear Mass everyday, and say many Rosaries in public . . . and whoever is at all able to read carries with him the Office of Our Lady; and they recite it in the Church with some companion in a low voice, verse by verse, after the manner of religious."⁵ Often it was learned by heart, and frequently it served as the first instruction in reading for the children of the Middle Ages. The written testimony of Caxton in the *Book of Curtesye* in 1477 is ample evidence:

*Your pater noster saye in devoute wise
Ave Maria with holy crede . . .
And while that ye be aboute honestly
To dress your self and do on your array . .
Our Lady matins loke that ye saye . . .
With prime and hours*

In the days when England was Mary's Land, the scholars of Eton and Oxford were admonished to recite Our Lady's hours daily. Even when Mary was no longer given title in that land the faithful laity secretly recited her Office, proof of which is attested to by the biographers of that period, citing the numerous extant criminal records.

The Little Office is universal. "In the course of time and in different places varying forms of it sprang up. The Office of the Roman Rite was fixed by the Breviary of St. Pius V in 1568. But side by side with that breviary, others were allowed to subsist if they could claim a use of two hundred years: for example that of St. Peter in Rome, the Ambrosian in Milan, the Benedictine, Praemonstratensian, Cistercian, Carmelite, Dominican, Bridgettine. Some of these have preserved simpler forms of Our Lady's Office."⁶ So, amid universal usage, the Dominican Order is found to have its own rite for the Little Office.

THE DOMINICAN HERITAGE

In his preface to the work on Mary's Office just cited Father Hilary Carpenter, O.P., refers to it as a "precious heritage of the

⁵ *The Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, reprinted 1948, p. 6.

⁶ Mary Ryan, M.A., *Our Lady's Hours*. Cork: The Mercier Press, 1946, p. 17.

sons and daughters of Saint Dominic." A heritage which in a manner existed before the heirs themselves, it is true; a heritage shared in varying forms with others outside the Dominican family; yet withal this office is a precious Dominican heritage because the Order from its earliest days has clung tenaciously to this form of homage to its fairest Patroness.

In the dawning days of the Order its legislation specified in clear terms the obligation of reciting Mary's hours. Officially the Dominicans' day began and ended with the praise of their Mother. The recitation of the Office was to be private, except for Matins which was recited before the community left the dormitory, and Compline, which was recited in choir following the same hour of the Divine Office. Not until 1921 was this obligation suppressed by Pope Pius XI for the First and Second Orders. Today the Dominican Constitutions read: "In the novitiate daily and in common the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary is to be recited and to all the Brethren private recitation of that Office is recommended."⁷

The composition of the Dominican Little Office varies in particulars from the Roman Office, yet a common origin is clearly seen in the general makeup of both Offices. Variety *versus* simplicity are apt terms to differentiate both forms. Therefore, under diverse aspects each Office has independent advantages. The Roman Rite divides its year extensively, while the Dominican Rite, through greater compactness, has more unity. "The study of any Rite throws abundant light on the others; many parts are common, and the same elements occur, though in different uses and places."⁸

Because the Little Office is truly liturgical prayer, when one recites it in union with Mary's Son, the creature's insignificance becomes obliterated in the magnificence of the Church praise. Such is the official function of liturgical prayer. "Hence we can understand why St. Dominic gave the liturgy so large a place . . . primarily because it is, par excellence, the divine homage and enables us to acquit ourselves of our prime duty, the glorification of God; but also because it leads the religious to the perfection of his state, since it is the most simple and certain way to become like Jesus Christ."⁹ To see the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin in its true perspective—to glimpse it as sharing in the setting for the Holy Sacrifice—is a bless-

⁷ *Constitutiones Fratrum. S. Ordinis Praedicatorum*. Rome, 1932. n. 565.

⁸ Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁹ Marie-Vincent Bernadot, O.P., "The Place of the Liturgy in Dominican Spirituality." Translated by A. Townsend, O.P., in *Dominican Spirituality*. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1934, p. 91.

ing. How much greater is actual participation in this chant to the Mother of God! For those who make use of the Little Office "a selfless and generous participation in the essential obedience of Our Lord is the primary requirement" for them as members of His Mystical Body. This obediential aspect of Office recitation flows into a sense of delight for Dominic's children as they thank God for giving Mary to the human race. At the same time the Office congratulates Mary and implores her motherly intercession.

Once again, St. Thomas Aquinas' classic *contemplare et contemplata aliis tradere*—to contemplate and to hand on to others the fruits of contemplation—has become an object of much discussion and interpretation. The supernal union achieved in contemplation is the essence of Dominican prayer. Yet the Dominican's prayer extends itself: "for it is better to illumine than to merely light; it is better to hand on the fruits of contemplation rather than merely contemplate" as Saint Thomas so succinctly phrases it. Through his prayer "is manifested his vocation, no longer divided but unified in a double faculty, to absorb itself in light, to become itself luminous without suspecting it, to give light far and wide."¹⁰

For Dominican Brothers, Sisters and Lay Tertiaries the voluntary acceptance of this Office today earns for them the name of Preachers of the Eternal Word. The Apostolic intention of their prayer fructifies the seeds planted by the preaching Friars, and at the same time sustains the preachers themselves. As Père Joret in an excellent chapter on the relationship of the Mass and the Office explains: "The consciousness that they are supplying the place of the Fathers in this function should act as an encouragement and as an incentive to perseverance. And thus . . . the Order remains faithful to the ancient practice of supplementing the Great Office with the Little Office of Our Lady, its august Patron."¹¹ This was Dominic's dream on earth; this must now be his delight in heaven. Those charged with the recitation of Mary's Hours have offered to them an excellent opportunity for true Dominican prayer. The regularity, the sameness, the repetition of this Office should be as lifts on this arduous climb, not obstacles. They "need not be like people traversing each day the same road, bordered by walls and closed gates, when they have only to open the gates and look into the pleasancess beyond. These forms of prayer can be enriched by knowledge about them.

¹⁰ Antoine Gardeil, O.P., *The Gifts of the Holy Ghost in the Dominican Saints*. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1937, p. 101.

¹¹ F. D. Joret, O.P., *Dominican Life*. Westminster, Md.: The Newman Bookshop, 1947, p. 152.

Some formulas yield up their secrets only after much use and thoughtful repetition.”¹²

With a thrill of close knit affection we read that our saintly brothers and sisters in Saint Dominic held the devotion to their Mother's Office in highest esteem. Daily Saints Antoninus and Vincent Ferrer were accustomed to recite it on their knees. The seraphic Catherine of Siena deemed it one of the more perfect ways of drawing near to her beloved Spouse, while Margaret, pearl of sanctity in Hungary, derived her deepest consolations from its recital. Both the *Lives of the Brethren* and innumerable lessons of the Divine Office provide abundant evidence of the Dominican family's zealous devotion to the Office of its Queen down through the centuries.

CONCLUSION

For the Dominican of today in each Order, then, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin is a practical, vital devotion, not something buried in oblivion. In Mary's Hours their Dominican life finds a certain completion, as through these they venerate their Mother and through Her draw near to Christ, Her Son. Daily they extol her, the Mother of God, in whose honor the gemlike *Benedictus* antiphon of her Little Office glows in the diadem of the Church's Christmas liturgy :

Genuit puerpera Regem cui nomen aeternum; et gaudia matris habens cum virginitatis honore nec primam similem visa est, nec habere sequentem.

A woman in child-birth brought forth a King Whose Name is eternal; and, possessing a mother's joy with a virgin's honor, her like hath not appeared before nor since.

¹² Ryan, *op. cit.*, p. 172.