

## **An Overview of the Daily Office<sup>1</sup>**

Dwight W. Vogel, OSL

The apostle Paul writes: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-19). However, we also know that focused times of prayer are essential, for in them we are formed in such a way that we can live into Paul's admonition.

Setting aside times for prayer was already part of the spirituality of our Jewish forbears in the faith, for in the psalms we read: "Seven times a day I praise you." (Psalm 119:164a) Patterns for daily prayer were inherited and continued by the New Testament church, and although set patterns took centuries to develop, the punctuation of each day with prayer is present in the Church's life from the beginning. With regard to the experience of the early church, Robert Taft observes:

Christians by faith had the supreme joy of knowing that they lived a new life in Christ, a life of love shared with all of the same faith. What could have been more normal then, than for those who were able to gather at daybreak to turn the first thoughts of the day to this mystery of their salvation and to praise and glorify God for it? And at the close of the day they came together once again to ask forgiveness for the failings of the day and to praise God once more for his mighty deeds. In this way the natural rhythm of time was turned into a hymn of praise to God and a proclamation before the world of faith in his salvation in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

This manifestation of daily prayer is not a sporadic pattern of prayer dependent on a given cultural and temporal spiritual milieu. It is a form of prayer shared throughout Christian history by East and West, by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, by Anglicans, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists among others. Forms of daily prayer that embody this historic and ecumenical pattern can be called the "daily office." As Robert Taft observes, the daily office has been there in one form or another "from the early centuries until our own day. That is a very respectable track record, one that the Church could not ignore and remain true to its heritage."<sup>3</sup>

Yet for many Christians, attention to corporate services of the Church has been focused primarily on services of Word and Table, and largely on those services that take place on the Lord's Day. This relative inattention to the Daily Office is quite different

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from chapter 9 in *Ordo: Bath, Word, Prayer, Table* edited by Dirk G. Lange and Dwight W. Vogel (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2005). Portions of the following section are adapted from articles written by the author that have appeared in the periodical *Sacramental Life* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke Publications).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East of West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986) p. 359.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East of West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

from the experience of the ancient church. Take for example the *Apostolic Constitutions*, written in Greek around 380 by a Syrian living near Antioch, in which we read:

Do not be neglectful of yourselves nor rob the savior of his members nor divide his body nor scatter his members, nor prefer the needs of this life to the Word of God, but assemble each day morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord's houses . . . . But especially on the Sabbath and the Lord's Day of the resurrection of the Lord, meet even more diligently, sending up praise to God.<sup>4</sup>

Both daily services of prayer and Lord's Day services were important for the ancient church. But over the centuries, that balance has eroded. While never entirely forsaken by the Church at large, and consistently maintained in one form or another by religious orders, the role of the Daily Office in the life of the whole Church has been severely limited. Current attention to the reclamation of the Daily Office is evident in an article by Arthur Paul Boers in *The Christian Century*: "Reviving an Ancient Practice: The Office of Prayer."<sup>5</sup>

The Daily Office has to do with a daily pattern of prayer, rather than a weekly one focused on the Lord's Day, or a yearly one focused on Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. However, not just any pattern will do. Neither private or personal "devotions" on the one hand, nor corporate "prayer meetings" or "group devotions" on the other, automatically qualify. Rather, the Daily Office reflects the historic prayer of the Church related to "canonical hours" – those specified times which are a measuring stick (a "canon") for our prayer life together. Furthermore, both this historic pattern and the services within it are spoken of as an "office." An office is a task or responsibility entrusted to us. It is not something we can choose or not on the basis of our preferences and feelings at the moment.

The historical development of the times for, and names of, the various offices is complex and conditioned by many factors. As we look at the *ordo* of liturgical time here, we will follow two cues. One is found in Psalm 119:164, the text cited above, which reads: "Seven times a day I praise you." The number seven is symbolic of completeness, or wholeness. Thus, having seven offices should remind us that all of life is to be prayer.

Our historical cue comes from Basil the Great in the fourth century who lays out the pattern of the seven offices in this way:

In the morning [we pray] so that the first movements of the soul and mind may be consecrated to God, and nothing else be taken into consideration before we have been delighted by the thought of God . . . . Again at the third hour we must stand up to pray . . . . recalling the gift of the Spirit given to the apostles at the third hour (Acts 2:15). . . . And we judge prayer to be necessary at the sixth

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<sup>4</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, II, 59.

<sup>5</sup> *The Christian Century*, March 21-28, 2001, pp. 14-15.

hour, in imitation of the saints who say: "Evening and morning and at noon I will speak and declare and he shall hear my voice" (Ps. 54:17). . . . The ninth [hour] was handed down to us as necessary for prayer by the apostles themselves in Acts where it is related that "Peter and John went up to the temple at the ninth hour of prayer" (Acts 3:11). And when the day is finished, thanksgiving should be offered for what has been given us during the day or for what we have done rightly and confession made of what we have failed to do . . . And again at the beginning of the night we ask that our rest may be without offence . . . And Paul and Silas have handed on to us midnight as necessary for prayer, as the story of Acts proves, saying: "And at midnight Paul and Silas praised God" (Acts 16:25).<sup>6</sup>

Here we have the two offices most often prayed by a gathered community (Morning and Evening Prayer) – sometimes called "cathedral offices" or "people's offices;" three offices during the day (mid-morning, mid-day, and mid-afternoon prayer) and "bedtime prayer" from the monastic tradition, and something already present in the life of the early church, the Vigil. These seven offices, penetrating the day with prayer, form a pattern for the Daily Office:

- Morning Prayer (*Matins* or *Lauds*)
- Mid-morning Prayer (*Terce*)
- Mid-day Prayer (*Sext*)
- Mid-afternoon Prayer (*None*—rhymes with "own")
- Evening Prayer (Vespers or Evensong)
- Night Prayer (*Compline*)
- Vigil

However, when we speak of Daily Prayer as part of the *ordo* of liturgical time, we are not necessarily referring to this particular pattern, but to the underlying experience of the Church that daily prayer, seen as the prayer of the Church and not as individual private devotions, is part of the basic cadence of time kept by the Church. What is more important than the number of offices each day is that these times of prayer be unhurried so that, as Romano Guardini puts it, "that which has been heard or read has time to cease echoing and to sink into the mind."<sup>7</sup>

## EVENING PRAYER

The evening office has three names: evening prayer, vespers, and (because it is frequently sung) evensong. It is the most fully developed of the ancient offices, with the possible exception of a vigil prior to a festival or holy day. For our Jewish forbearers in the faith and hence the early Christian church, a day began at dusk. The Daily Office thus begins with evening prayer, just as we noted above that the week begins with Saturday evening, not Sunday morning.

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<sup>6</sup> *Longer Rules*, 37:2-5. See Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* 31, pp. 1012ff.

<sup>7</sup> *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (first published in 1918; current edition – New York: Herder and Herder, 1997), 21.

In the third century Cyprian wrote: "At sunset and the passing of the day it is necessary to pray. For since Christ is the true sun and the true day, when we pray and ask, as the sun and the day of the world recede, that the light may come upon us again, we pray for the coming of Christ, which provides us with the grace of eternal light."<sup>8</sup>

Even before Christian prayer used a service of light, rituals of lighting the evening lamps were already present in the culture. It was necessary, of course, in order to see, and it was not as simple as flipping a switch. Light was received gratefully, and greeted "Hail, good light!" or "Hail, friendly light!" Taft speaks of the entrance of the light as "a baptized pagan rite"<sup>9</sup> but it is clear that even before there was a formal service, family piety in Christian homes would greet the evening lamp with praise for Christ, the light of the world.

By the seventh century in Spain, the light ritual was called the "oblation of light" and involved elevating a lighted candle before the altar. This was accompanied by a proclamation and response which come amazingly close to the dialogue for the Entrance of the Light we use today: "Light and peace in Jesus Christ!" "Thanks be to God!"<sup>10</sup>

The *Phos hilaron* ("joyful light") or evening hymn was also known in ancient times as a *eucharistia*, a thanksgiving for the light. Basil already knew it as an ancient part of the tradition in the fourth century: "We cannot say who was the father of the words of the thanksgiving for the light," he writes, "but the people utter the ancient formula, and . . . were never thought impious by anyone."<sup>11</sup>

The resonance between the service of light and baptism is often overlooked. For those who have celebrated an Easter Vigil, lighting the vesper candle resonates with the lighting of the Paschal candle at the first service of Easter. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the service of light in the Easter vigil derives from the *Lucernarium* of vespers, not as we might suppose the other way around.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, in the early Church, baptism was called *phôtismos* or *phôtisma*, that is, "illumination" and those to be baptized were known as the *illuminandi*<sup>13</sup> At the lighting of the vesper light, we do well to remember our baptism and be thankful! Since the time of the ancient church, there has also been an eschatological dimension here, for we are reminded of the Johannine vision of the Lamb as the eternal lamp of the heavenly city, the sun that never sets.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For the complete context, see chapters 34-36 of Cyprian's *On the Lord's Prayer*.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>10</sup> Taft, 161.

<sup>11</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 29 (73).

<sup>12</sup> Taft, 37.

<sup>13</sup> Taft, 350-351.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 39:18 and *Apostolic Tradition* 25.

By the fourth century, vespers was a time to “review and conclude the day, thanking God for graces received, begging pardon for faults committed, and requesting protection from sin and danger throughout the coming night . . . [it] continued to share with the newer compline its original purpose as a service of thanksgiving, examination of conscience, and forgiveness, . . . [incorporating] such classic cathedral elements as the *lucernarium* with hymn, Psalm 141 with incense, and intercessions.”<sup>15</sup>

It is interesting to note that somehow the Daily Office escaped the great medieval and reformation fixation on guilt. While bits of confession may appear here and there in the other offices, it is only in Vespers and Compline that Confession and Pardon are an essential part of the office. This is a spiritually healthy approach. It is in the evening, as we reflect on the past day, that we must be honest before God.

There are some who are convinced that preaching is out of place in the Daily Office; it is primarily a service of prayer and contemplation. There is much to be said for such an approach, especially in a Protestant religious culture which places the sermon (and rarely a brief one at that) as the most important element in worship. Yet we must recognize that the Church survived homilies in connection with Vigils, Morning and Evening Prayer, both in the early church<sup>16</sup> and in Anglican practice where “Morning Prayer with Sermon” was a prevalent Sunday morning pattern. A homily can replace or supplement a reading to the benefit of the gathered community, providing the preacher knows that the preaching is to serve the office and our capacity to pray it and not that the office exists for the sake of the sermon, and, one supposes, the preacher! Brevity and relevance to the office determine whether a homily is appropriate or not.

On the evening before or the evening of a holy day or festival, a gathered community may use more scripture, sing as much of the office as possible, and add other appropriate elements to the office. In such circumstances, we speak of “Solemn Vespers.” Here the word “solemn” does not mean gloomy or dismal, the connotation it tends to have today. Rather, to use words from *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, it means “full,” “sumptuous,” “splendid,” “awe-inspiring,” “deeply earnest.” Thus, we used to hear of “the solemnization of matrimony.” The synonym of “solemnize” is “celebration,” so perhaps we would communicate more clearly if we spoke of such services as “The Celebration of Vespers” – but that gets us into trouble because “celebration” has come to be associated with happy joy, and that is not quite right either.

The traditional canticle for Evening Prayer is the *Magnificat* – Mary’s song found in Luke 1:46-55. Gail Ramshaw describes it as “that psalm-like praise of the God who turns the established order upside down,” while at the same time “asking God to

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<sup>15</sup> Taft, p. 90.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. Ambrose (c. 334-379), *Letter 20:13-25*; Augustine (387-430), *De curia ip mortuis gerenda 5 (7)*; St. Caesarius of Arles (c. 503-542), *Sermon 76:3, 86:5, and 196.2*.

remember the promise of mercy made to our ancestors” and pleading “for all the lowly and hungry of the world.”<sup>17</sup> Praise is juxtaposed with lament, memory with hope, thanksgiving with intercession as the evening shadows fall.

#### *MORNING PRAYER*

In *The Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215 C.E., attributed by earlier scholarship to Hippolytus), morning and evening prayer have a paschal orientation, nightfall and sunrise being metaphors of the dying and rising of Christ.<sup>18</sup> Clement, Origen and Tertullian related this to Christ as the sun of justice and the light of the world.<sup>19</sup> For the Eastern church in the third and fourth centuries, “the rising sun and the new day with its change from darkness to light recalled the resurrection from the dead of Christ, Sun of Justice.”<sup>20</sup>

In the twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer recalls similar themes when he writes:

The early morning belongs to the Church of the risen Christ. At the break of light it remembers the morning on which death and sin lay prostrate in defeat and new life and salvation were given to [hu]mankind. What do we today, who no longer have any fear or awe of night, know of the great joy that our forefathers and the early Christians felt every morning at the return of light? If we were to learn again something of the praise and adoration that is due the triune God at break of day, God the Father and Creator, who has preserved our life through the dark night and waken us to a new day, God the Son and Saviour, who conquered death and hell for us and dwells in our midst as Victor, God the Holy Spirit, who pours the bright gleam of God’s Word into our hearts at the dawn of day, driving away all darkness and sin and teaching us to pray aright – then we would also begin to sense something of the joy that comes when night is past.<sup>21</sup>

The morning office begins with Psalm 51:15: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” When a time of silence has been kept from the previous office, these words have added significance as we “break the silence” with a prayer for praise. In any event, every morning we break the silence of sleep. Most of the prayers we pray are corporate: we say “we” and “us” even when we are praying alone. Here, however, we are reminded that the Lord breaks our silence and enables us to speak in praise of God and in communion with one another.

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<sup>17</sup> Gail Ramshaw, *Reviving Sacred Speech: The Meaning of Liturgical Language* (Akron, OH: OSL Publications, 2000), 143.

<sup>18</sup> Taft, p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> Taft, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Taft, p. 56.

<sup>21</sup> *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1954), pp. 40-43.

From the beginning, the Psalter has been the heart of the prayer of the daily office. The Roman office, following Vatican II, abandoned the monastic pattern of continuous psalmody (praying through the entire psalter from beginning to end) and adopted the cathedral approach of selecting psalms related to the hour of the office.

The morning canticle is the song of Zechariah, known as The *Benedictus*. Indeed, the use of psalms and the evangelical canticles have sometimes been the only scripture used in the Daily Office. Even when that is so, these songs from Luke proclaim the gospel to us day after day, week after week, year after year, in ways that work to incorporate us into the Paschal mystery.

## VIGIL

The Vigil Office joins Morning and Evening Prayer as having been both a people's or cathedral office and a part of the monastic tradition. Even a brief look at the first six centuries makes clear that "vigil" is a term used for not one, but for several kinds of night offices, distinguished by frequency or time of observance, even though the structure remains much the same.<sup>22</sup> Without examining all the variations, let us note the following forms of the Vigil:

1. A midnight office.
2. An all-night vigil.
3. A "resurrection vigil" on the eve before the Lord's Day.
4. A vigil in connection with a holy day.

### 1. A midnight office.

By the fourth century, the Cappadocian monastics had a midnight vigil office.<sup>23</sup> The pre-Constantinian church related night prayer to the watch of the virgins awaiting the coming of the bridegroom, as well as the unceasing praise of the angels which we will share.<sup>24</sup> In addition, a text (sometimes in years past attributed to Hippolytus) reads:

For the elders who gave us the tradition taught us that at that hour all creation is still for a moment, to praise the Lord; stars, trees, waters stop for an instant, and all the host of angels . . . praise God with the souls of the righteous in that hour. That is why believers should take good care to pray at this hour. Bearing witness to this, the Lord says thus, "Lo, about midnight a shout was made . . . saying Lo, the bridegroom comes; rise to meet him."<sup>25</sup>

These themes (the praise of all creation and eschatological expectation) are particularly transparent when the Vigil is observed as a midnight office.

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East of West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 165.

<sup>23</sup> Taft, p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Taft, pp. 29-29.

<sup>25</sup> as quoted in Taft, p. 24.

## 2. An all-night vigil.

Cassian describes a monastic all-night vigil in Bethlehem on Fridays in commemoration of the passion, beginning with vespers.<sup>26</sup> But it is with Ambrose of Milan that all-night vigils became a people's office. In Holy Week of 385 A.D. the Empress Justina wanted the basilica for the use of the Arians. When Ambrose refused, imperial troops kept Ambrose and his congregation confined for three days. Paulinus writes that "it was in this time that antiphons, hymns and vigils first began to be celebrated in the Church of Milan . . . [a practice] that remains to this day not only in that Church but indeed throughout almost all the provinces of the West."<sup>27</sup> Sometimes this all-night vigil was broken up into little night offices (akin to the little diurnal offices we will examine below) called "nocturns." An all-night vigil, whether kept by the whole community or sequentially by its members, embodies the same basic themes as the midnight office.

## 3. A "resurrection vigil" on the eve before the Lord's Day.

By the fourth century, as Egeria and the *Apostolic Constitutions* report, both Jerusalem and Antioch had a weekly resurrection vigil as a people's office before the Lord's Day.<sup>28</sup> These pre-Eucharistic vigils consisted of vespers extended by the use of multiple lections, responsories and prayers, with particular emphasis on the readings from Scripture.<sup>29</sup> The Lord's Day deserves special attention in the Daily Office, and we do well to remind ourselves of the resurrection vigils of the early church in our Saturday evening prayers.

## 4. A vigil in connection with a holy day.

A baptismal vigil, originating in the Easter Vigil, came to be celebrated on the eve of Christmas, Epiphany and Pentecost when those became occasions for baptism. This vigil was also an extension of vespers, including the *lucernarium* (light ritual) and numerous Scripture lections read in the nave while baptizing was taking place in a separate baptistry.<sup>30</sup> From these great festival vigils has come the practice of preparing for a significant holy day with a vigil.

Whereas in the third century *Apostolic Tradition*, morning and evening prayer have a paschal orientation, symbolic of the dying and rising of Christ, the night hours

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<sup>26</sup> Cassian, *Institutes*, III, 4:2 and 8-9.

<sup>27</sup> Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 13. See Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 14, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Taft, p. 167, 189.

<sup>29</sup> Taft, p. 189.

<sup>30</sup> Taft, p. 189

have an eschatological perspective, looking to the parousia and the resurrection of the dead.<sup>31</sup> Cyprian, writing around 250 CE writes:

So let us who are always in Christ, that is, in the light, not cease praying even at night. This is how the widow Anna, always praying and keeping vigil, persevered in deserving well of God, as is written in the gospel: "She did not leave the temple, serving with fasting and prayers night and day" (Luke 2:37) . . . Let us not be hindered by the darkness which we have escaped, let there be no loss of prayers in the night hours.<sup>32</sup>

The canticle for the Vigil is the *Te Deum Laudamus*. In the middle ages, the *Te Deum Laudamus* was attributed to saints Ambrose and Augustine, along with the legend that it was improvised spontaneously and antiphonally by the two at the time of Augustine's baptism.<sup>33</sup> While that claim remains historically unsubstantiated, it is not difficult to imagine the two of them, both gifted in the use of language and filled with the Holy Spirit, either composing the text on the spot or improvising on an earlier text. Other sources attribute the text to a fourth century Bishop, Niceat (or Nicetas) of Remesiana, and that is probably more historically accurate.

A detailed and thorough study by Kähler concludes that the *Te Deum* originated before the middle of the fourth century as the preface, *Sanctus*, and post-sanctus prayer of an old Latin mass of the Easter Vigil which was, of course, a baptismal mass.<sup>34</sup> Without mentioning any author or source, a number of early texts cite it only as the "Hymn in Honor of the Holy Trinity."<sup>35</sup> St. Benedict directed its use at the Vigil, with special reference to Sundays and festivals, a practice followed by both the Roman and Sarum Breviaries, except that it was to be suppressed during Advent and Lent. The 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* appoints it to be used "daily throughout the year except in Lent." In 1552 that exception was removed, but common practice for most communities of prayer is to "fast" from its use during Lent.<sup>36</sup>

In the *Te Deum Laudamus*, the significance of the Vigil office becomes clear. In this office, the prayer of the Church through all times and places is joined with the praise of earth and all stars, as well as the heavenly host:<sup>37</sup> ". . . we praise you . . . we acclaim you . . . all creation worships you;" "to you all angels, all the powers of heaven . . . sing in endless praise." The opening lines of this "preface" move us to the great

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<sup>31</sup> Taft, p. 25.

<sup>32</sup> *The Lord's Prayer*, chapter 36.

<sup>33</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), v. 18, p. 641.

<sup>34</sup> See E. Kähler, *Studien zum Te Deum* (Göttingen, 1958), cited in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), v. 18, p. 641.

<sup>35</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), v. 13, p. 954

<sup>36</sup> W. K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London: SPCK, 1932)

<sup>37</sup> On the three parts of this canticle, see Matthew Britt, *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922), pp. 46ff.; *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), v. 13, p. 954; and *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* cited above.

*Sanctus* of the seventh and eighth lines in words which resonate with our Eucharistic feasts:

“Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,  
heaven and earth are full of your glory.”

Then, lest we assume that only those of this particular time and place are the Church, we affirm the praise of “the glorious company of the apostles, the noble fellowship of the prophets, and the white robed army of martyrs” and “the holy Church throughout the world” before breaking into a great Trinitarian doxology.

As the Great Thanksgiving we pray at celebrations of the Eucharist move to a focus on the person and work of Christ following the *Sanctus*, so the *Te Deum* moves to a celebration of the Paschal mystery, pointing to incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, coming judgment, and final consummation, but always in terms of our participation in them, a vibrant affirmation of the paschal mystery:

“When you came in flesh to set us free,  
you did not shun the Virgin’s womb.  
You overcame the sting of death,  
and opened heaven to all believers.  
You are seated at God’s right hand in glory;  
we believe that you will come to be our judge.  
Come then Lord, and help your people,  
bought with the price of your own blood,  
And bring us with your saints to glory everlasting.”

This invocation for God’s help with its eschatological perspective may have concluded the ancient canticle. The prayers that follow were probably originally the *capitellum*, that is an antiphon (usually from a psalm) used at the conclusion of a canticle. In fact, a whole series of these versicles and responses from the psalms have been appended to the *Te Deum*. Since they were always sung with it they came to be thought of as a part of the canticle itself.<sup>38</sup> They serve as a summary of all the prayers of the people we lift up.

The *Te Deum* is a glorious summary containing the heart and soul of our daily prayer, not in some minimalist and truncated form, but uniting us with all creation, with all the Church, and with all the voices of heaven in a great hymn of praise to the Triune God. Such praise is not something we can rush into, however. Its mystery may be out of sight, but it is not beyond our sensing it. The monastic pattern is wise: the Vigil is preceded and succeeded by a great silence in which we are quiet before God in order that we may hear the music of the spheres, the song of the angels, and the hymn of Church praising God in the depths of our souls echoing to the heights of heaven.

#### THE DIURNAL HOURS AND COMPLINE

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<sup>38</sup> Clarke, pp. 273-274.

People of the New Testament and early church era thought of daytime as involving twelve hours divided into groups of three with the third, sixth and ninth hours being the usual points of reference. This would not have been a matter of “clock time” but rather a reference to mid-morning, noon, and mid-afternoon.

When I worked in the hayfields of Kansas as a youth, we would count on a mid-morning and mid-afternoon “lunch” being brought to the field, and to returning to the farmhouse at mid-day for dinner. It was nourishment that sustained us in the presence of the prairie’s searing sun and hot wind. So it is that these became times for the nourishment of prayer, based in the older Jewish times for prayer. In the third century, Cyprian found in them “a sacrament of the Trinity.”<sup>39</sup>

In the pre-Constantinian era, the diurnal or day-time offices recalled the passion in Mark 15.<sup>40</sup> At the third hour, Jesus was nailed to the tree; at the sixth hour, darkness fell; at the ninth hour, Jesus died. The third hour was also a memorial of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>41</sup> These were times for private prayer, as they continue to be for many who pray them, and it was not until the fourth century that they became corporate monastic offices.

These “little offices” are intentionally brief and simple, capable of either being “shoe-horned” into a busy day, or prayed in a quiet and unhurried setting. A “little chapter” is provided – only a few verses of scripture on which to center our minds and hearts. A concluding prayer focuses our thoughts on the meaning of the office for the lives we lead. These offices are diaconal in nature, bridges between the Church and the world, between worship and work so that “those who wait on the Lord for help will find their strength renewed.” Day by day, O Lord, “hear our prayer and let our cry come to You.”

Which brings us to *Compline*, a word coming from the same Latin root as our word “complete.” This is the service that closes the day as we understand it, the last liturgical prayer of the day, unless there is a Vigil. This is the Church’s bedtime prayer. The Armenian office of the Christian East speaks of “the hour of peace” and “the hour of rest.”<sup>42</sup> The service should end in silence, with persons leaving gradually only as they are ready, when peace and rest have overwhelmed the troubles and concerns of this life, or if that is impossible, when we are able to allow the Savior to bear them with us, thus finding rest for our souls.

Prayer before sleep undoubtedly began as a personal or family devotional practice; it was in the monastic community that gathering to share those prayers in

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<sup>39</sup> Taft, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Taft, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Taft, p. 28.

<sup>42</sup> Taft, p. 220.

common grew into an office all its own by the fourth century. It would have been prayed in the dark, or very nearly in the dark at least. Its contents were thus extremely stable so they could be easily memorized and prayed without anyone needing to read a book. While contemporary culture allows us additional flexibility in this regard, the basic components of this office continue to remain much the same throughout the year.

The Call to Prayer introduces us to the twin themes of the office: "The Lord almighty grant us a restful night and peace at the last." In order to have a restful night, we will need to have confessed our sins and received the assurance of forgiveness for them. But we also pray for "peace at the last." For the early Christians and, even more so, for the medieval mind, sleep was a rehearsal of death. Compline helps us prepare for death, both the death of baptism and physical death. In both cases, death does not have the last word. The last word is God's and that word is "resurrection." Compline, then, is a quiet service of hope and trust in which we give ourselves into God's hands.

The commendation, adapted from the historic Sarum Breviary, provides words of great depth and comfort:

In peace we will lie down and sleep.

*In the Lord alone we safely rest.*

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping,

*that awake we may watch with Christ,*

*and asleep we may rest in peace.*

May the divine help remain with us always.

*And with those who are absent from us.*

*- silence -*

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit,

*For you have redeemed me, O Lord,*

*O God of Truth.<sup>43</sup>*

Here we have the themes of Compline brought into dynamic relationship: trust, hope, redemption, the need for guidance in waking and guarding in sleeping, our need for help, our preparation for death as we join our prayer with the prayer of Jesus on the cross: "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

The Canticle of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*, is not only the evangelical canticle sung at Compline from very early on, but also the words which John Calvin thought should be used after every celebration of the Lord's Supper. And, as I can attest from standing beside my father's deathbed, they speak profoundly of our passover from death to life eternal.

The Daily Office is a *school of prayer*, an ongoing novitiate in which we are taught how the Church has glorified God through the ages, entering into the paschal

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<sup>43</sup> This particular form is found in the Ordinary for Compline in any volume of *The Daily Office: A Book of Hours for Daily Prayer* (Akron, OH: Order of Saint Luke Publications), Dwight W. Vogel, ed.

mystery through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. From day to day, week to week, season to season, festival to festival, we are plunged into the great mysteries of God's grace. By our continual participation in this rhythm, our lives resonate with it. We begin to understand and embody "Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). We are drawn again and again from the peripheral to what is central to the life of faith.

These basic rhythms of day and week and year are grounded in the historic experience of the Church rather than the ebb and flow of our transitory moods. As Taft puts it, this ongoing school of prayer "pulls us out of whatever bourgeois sentimentalism and inverted egoism there may be in our 'private' devotions, and draws us inexorably into the objective spiritual values of a life lived according to the mystery that is Christ."<sup>44</sup>

This school of prayer provides a discipline of learning, which frees us from bondage to our own emotions and preferences. It takes the state of our own soul seriously, inviting us to confession, to lament, to thanksgiving, to supplication, to service. It provides us with core experiences so that in the daily rounds of our existence, we have words and images and patterns so deeply imbedded in us that we learn to see and experience and interpret life in light of that schooling.

The Daily Office is *the prayer of the Church*, part of its *ordo* of time. It is not that my own concerns and prayers and praises are unimportant or irrelevant. Rather they are placed within the framework of the prayer of the Church through the ages and around the world. In the Daily Office, one does not pray alone. When we pray the *Magnificat* at Evening Prayer, we are doing what Christians have done at every evening prayer of every day of every week of every year since the time of the early church. It is an ecumenical act, prayed by an amazing multitude of Christian traditions and denominations from East to West and North to South around the world. In the *ordo* of liturgical time known as the Daily Office, we are part of the "communion of the saints" at prayer.

St. Chrodegang, an eighth century bishop of Metz, provided that "whoever cannot be in church for the hours in common must say them in private."<sup>45</sup> That direction has had far-reaching effects. The Daily Office is always corporate prayer, even when prayed as a solitary office rather than in the immediate presence of a community. Whether we do it alone or in company does not change the nature of the prayer – although if we do not do it together as often as possible, we are not likely to be truthful with ourselves about our belief that it is corporate! Unlike the Eucharist that by its very nature must be done in the presence of others, the Daily Office is prayer, and prayer can be done individually or with others, but that prayer will always be the Church's prayer.

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<sup>44</sup> Taft, p. 369.

<sup>45</sup> Taft, p. 299.

Thus, for Gordon Lathrop, daily prayer “welcomes whoever is able to gather, in the name of the full assembly” as they “bring to expression a communal honesty about the time of day, about the primal joys and fears that do really attend these daily changes in the light . . . [marking] these rhythms with reference to the gospel.”<sup>46</sup> As the Song of Zechariah, the Song of Mary, and the Song of Simeon remind us, every day is reinterpreted “as a day for the encounter with the hope-giving, justice-making, rest-giving light of God in Christ.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Lathrop, *Holy Ground*, 167.

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