

thy purpose is now changed, set fully for to please Jesus Christ in cleanness of maidenhood, and look that thou be now more busy, so that none overpass thee in good living and that none overpass nor overcome thee in holiness of manners, that none in virtues be set before thee. And that shalt thou better do if that thou think that thou doest naught thyself and that all other be better than thou, such business shalt thou have in getting of virtues and then shalt thou nought dread but that thou shalt get them, for they may lightloker¹³ be purchased than may riches of this world.



THE LITTLE OFFICE MEDITATED

BY

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THE Latin word *Officium*, like the Greek word *Liturgia*, means duty or service; hence 'Office'. Both these words describe what we know as Divine Worship—that which is the prime duty of man and the purpose of his creation.

The supreme form of worship is the Sacrifice the Mass. That is the central gem, and it has a setting—the Divine Office. This setting is further elaborated by the Little Office and all the ceremonies which go to make up the official public worship of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. This is all known as 'The Liturgy'—the public, official and universal worship of God.

Now the Liturgy is taken almost exclusively from the Bible—the inspired Word of God; God-written in fact. Both our Lord and our Lady used the psalms as a norm of worship. David himself said, 'Seven times a day do I worship thee', and therefore we speak of the seven 'Hours'.

Both the Divine Office and the Little Office were of obligation on religious in the old days, and it was not until the eighteenth or even the nineteenth century that they were dispensed from saying the Little Office. The average Catholic now considers the Morning Offering and Night Prayers—five minutes at the beginning and end of each day—as the normal

¹³ more lightly.

prayer time. 'We haven't time for more.' We have time for a great many other things; but he, who loves us beyond our wildest conception, who showers blessings on us, to whom we owe our very existence every minute, has to be content with a rather grudging few minutes.

This is where the Tertiary vocation comes in. We endeavour to make up for all that is missing. We say the Little Office—and saying it under obedience achieves greater merit—and thus make up to our Lady for any loss resulting from the 'dispensation' of the religious. It is easy enough to say our private prayers at our bedside. But to say the Office takes more initiative and energy; perhaps to say it 'in common' requires even more effort; still more to keep to fixed hours; but all these 'efforts'—meritorious as they are in relation to their trouble—are infinitesimal compared with what our Lord does for us. The first Sorrowful Mystery is a salutary meditation: 'Could ye not watch one hour with me?'

Liturgical prayer, then, is a duty; it is impersonal in that it is the joint effort of the whole Mystical Body, hence the chant or monotone which merges the individual into the whole. Liturgical prayer, being impersonal, should be utterly unselfish; selfishness and pride have no place in it. That is why, unfortunately, it is hard for us.

Set out hereafter is a method of reciting the Little Office. Some find that, with the daily recitation of the psalms, they become mechanical, being repeated parrot-wise. With the Rosary as a model it seemed that a point for meditation might be taken for each psalm; a thought to be turned over in one's mind while the familiar words are repeated. Heart and tongue, therefore, can each play its full part.

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MATINS

'Open my lips, O Lord.' If you open my lips, if you inspire me, I can praise you adequately; with your own words, in fact.

Invitatorium and Venite. Summon the host of Heaven; the angels, the saints, all the Mystical Body to join in adoration at the beginning of the day.

Then, because it is our Lady's Office, we burst into a hymn to her.

Psalm 8. Everything and everybody praises you, O Lord.

I look at the heavens and sun, moon, stars; they all praise you by their perfect working. What am I? Only one degree less than the angels. You have put the earth under my command.

Psalm 18. The heavens conform perfectly with the laws of God. I, too, must conform with them—and can, with his help.

Psalm 23. The earth—down to earth now—shows his goodness, and I must, too. ‘Lift up your gates’—the barriers we erect against him—and let him come in and sanctify us.

Then we turn to his Mother—direct to her because she is in the midst of the heavenly crowd we have summoned. We praise her in the Lessons; the ‘crowd’ give the Responsories. Then follows the great pæan of thanks—the *Te Deum*.

LAUDS

Psalm 92. Praise; pure praise. Even the seas praise him by their movement.

Psalm 99. Be joyful, be bright, be happy, everyone. God is here. We are his children. He will look after us.

Psalm 62. Here we become personal. I do what I have been exhorting everything to do. I am in a ‘dry land’—this fallen world—but I want to praise you.

Benedicite. We cannot praise him in the least adequately, so back we go and call to all creation. Right up in Heaven we start. Angels; sun, moon and stars; all the elements. ‘*Benedicat terra*’—down to earth. Mountains, waters, fish, and beasts. Then the people. ‘*Benedicat Israel*’—the Church, the priests. Even to Purgatory—for them, at least, we try to do it. The spirits and souls.

Psalm 148. Our final burst of praise; we sum it all up again.

In the *Antiphon* we turn to our Lady. ‘*Post partum . . .*’ She herself speaks to us in the *Little Chapter*, and we follow by singing her a hymn.

Benedictus. Zachary, John the Baptist’s father, had been dumb; he would not believe that Elizabeth would have a son at their age. As soon as he ‘obeyed’, writing ‘His name is John’, his tongue was loosed and—being filled with the Holy Ghost—he sang in prophecy. Now indeed God is going to fulfil his prophecies and this child will be the forerunner of him who was promised. ‘*Praeibis ante faciem Domini parare vias ejus.*’

The Office ends with a prayer to our Lady, as it is her Office.

That ends, as it were, the Office proper, but we add a few prayers of our own. One to our Holy Founder, whose teaching and life we try to follow. Then to the saints of our Order for their special help. Then to all the saints, and finally a prayer for peace—peace of soul, inward peace; but it can also apply to the peace of the world which ‘the world cannot give’.

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The Psalms of the *Little Hours* are known as the Gradual Psalms; they were probably sung by pilgrims going up to Jerusalem. Gradual comes from the Latin *gradus*, a step, as it was a continual climb up to the ‘city set on a hill’. To us they can symbolise fifteen ‘steps up to heaven’—there are fifteen of them, if we exclude the Vesper psalms which are ‘on their own’—so it would be possible, as a variation, to meditate on the fifteen mysteries of the Rosary while reciting them. For meditation purposes in general we might take Jerusalem as heaven or the Church; Israel as the Mystical Body; ‘the enemy’, ‘the fowler and his snare’, ‘men rising against us’, as sin, atheists, and the enemies of Christ and his Church.

PRIME

The hymn, so beautiful that we repeat it over the four Little Hours. You, Lord, were born with a body such as ours; take pity, please, on our bodily weaknesses—sloth, gluttony, etc. ‘Mary, Mother of Grace’, protect us through life and at the hour of death. Glory to Thee, God born of a Virgin.

Psalm 119. Rather an ‘early morning feeling’ psalm. Because of my slothful spirit I cry to you. Save me from those people and things which may hinder the work which you send me today.

Psalm 120. I look to heaven and help comes from there. The psalm becomes a mutual blessing and well-wishing between us. A perfect morning greeting.

Psalm 121. We cry to each other: ‘It’s grand to be in the House of the Lord’—spiritually and physically; we pray for the peace of the Church all over the world.

In Prime all the psalms are rather personal; echoed from one to another rather than to God direct. The first person singular rather prevails, fitting in with the ‘morning mood’. The Responsory and Collect stress the Incarnation and we can apply it personally; we are born to a new day.

TERCE

Psalm 122. I look to you, Lord, as an unworthy servant. We are none of us worthy of the kindness and love you shower on us.

Psalm 123. If God had not been behind us we could never have survived the onslaughts of sin. We have suffered temptation: pride, sloth, despair, impatience. But God saved us from being overwhelmed. 'Our help' is in him.

Psalm 124. We go on to sing that if we trust him we shall be as strong and immovable as mountains. Nothing will shake us.

We bid our Lady rejoice: destroyer of heresies, Mother of divine Truth. She tells us—in the *Little Chapter*—she is in the Church, established in Jerusalem. We ask her—in the *Responsory*—to bring us the pardon her prayers in heaven will gain. In the *Collect* we ask for health of mind and body; we are on our day's work now.

SEXT

Psalm 125. Our work, so often of 'labour and sorrow', will be a great work when God puts his finishing touches to it. Our tears of contrition will be turned to joy when he leads us gently back from the crooked path into which we have strayed. We 'sow in tears . . . we reap in joy'.

Psalm 126. Our work is useless unless it is God's work. However early we get up, however hard we work, it is no good if we do not let God be with us. No need to worry, though, and this is very encouraging; our work will be fruitful if we ask his help.

Psalm 127. Another 'mutual' psalm as in Prime. Crying 'one to another in the Temple'. If you love our Lord your works will be fruitful and prosper. As the children of your body shall increase and multiply, so shall the 'children' of your mind. May you see your work prosper and flourish from seed to spreading tree.

'Rejoice and be glad, Mother dear, for your Son's work shall flourish.' In the *Collect* we pray for peace of mind, for only in that state can we work well and steadfastly.

NONE

Psalm 128. The enemies of the Church have tried again and again to crush her, but in vain. Christ flayed the money-changers; we verbally 'flay' the Church's foes.

Psalm 129. A personal act of contrition, and hope bursts in because I rely on the love of our Lord. In the last three verses we exhort each other to hope.

Psalm 130. A personal act of humility—humility of mind. Preserve us, Lord, from intellectual snobbery. Mother, 'Seat of Wisdom', pray for us. Again the mutual exhortation to hope comes at the end.

But in the *Little Chapter* our Mother tells us she was exalted, yet we might consider it was because of her humility. '*Ecce ancilla Domini.*'

This *Collect* is particularly beautiful and rather poignant. Forgive us; we cannot do anything good on our own, but may the prayers of our Mother—and yours—sanctify, dignify and prosper our work. Our work is rough; her prayers will smooth and polish it.

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VESPERS

Psalm 109. God tells me to lean on him and he will let me crush my sins, my weaknesses, under my feet. He speaks to me: 'I will give you strength; you are a priest for ever'. (Confirmation.)

Psalm 112. We have now praised God one to another. 'May his name be blessed from morning to night.' (This is what we are trying to do in the Little Office.)

Psalm 121. Here, as in the morning (Prime), we repeat our delight at being in the House of the Lord. Morning and night we pray for the peace of the Church.

Psalm 126. Again (Sext), we say it is useless to leave God out of our work. He wants a share in our work, wants to help if we will ask him. (Have we done his work today? Worked for him?)

Psalm 147. We exhort the Church to praise God. He strengthens her, guards her from error, works in a mysterious way through her.

In the *Little Chapter* our Lady speaks to us of the 'sweet fragrance of Motherhood'. In the *Hymn*—the simplest of hymns to our Lady—we remind her of what she has done for us, begging her prayers, that she may lead us to happiness through Jesus—'*semper collaetemur*'.

Magnificat. In humble wonderment she sings of what God has done for her. I, breaking from the crowd, sing of what he has done for me, using her words. 'Make me humble and I shall be made to rejoice. Empty me of all vanity that I may be filled with wisdom and happiness.'

In the *Collects*, as at Lauds, we pray to our Lady, St Dominic and the Saints, and once again beg for peace: peace in this apparently interminable warring, this perpetual fight between our two selves, the human and divine.

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COMPLINE

Here we have the completion (*Completorium*) of God's work—*Opus Dei*, the Office—and usually the completion of our own day's work.

Psalm 131. David's oath to God can be ours. We will not go to our rest till we are 'fit tabernacles for our Lord' in the morning. In the second part God speaks to us of his promises to the Church.

Psalm 132. We cry to each other how great it is to belong to the great family. Oil poured on the head was a sign of welcome to guests.

Psalm 133. A final exhortation to praise God. We think of the contemplative sisters rising in the middle of the night to keep the 'good work going'.

The *Antiphon* is a 'Goodnight' to our Mother. How often we said to our human mother, with that final hug: 'Oh, Mother, there's no one like you in the whole world'.

In the *Little Chapter* she assures us of her love.

Having sung her a final Hymn, we say:

Nunc Dimittis. Bid me rest now, O Lord. Today I have seen your works. Open my eyes to them always.

'*Sub tuum praesidium.*' Do not leave us, Mother dear. Just as mother used to stay till we were asleep.

The Collect. Lord, we are very weak, but may our Mother's prayers strengthen us.

SACROSANCTÆ

The craftsman, when he has finished a work, looks at it lovingly, noting, with regret, its imperfections. Here, Mother, is my work for you. Tidy it up and give it to your Son—my Brother. Tomorrow, and so on each day, I will try to do better.