

and redeemed individual soul. If so, shall we make use of the tools and materials we have got, striving ever to improve them, or shall we first jettison them and then think of making bricks, possibly without straw?



THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

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THE Mass, and the beauty of the Liturgy of the Mass, was one of the forces which overcame my struggles against the grace of God, and pulled me into the Church. And I could not get to know the Liturgy of the Mass without wanting to know more about the Church's official daily prayer, the jewelled setting of the daily sacrifice, the Divine Office. So, as a convert, newly received, I began to find out more about the Office and attend its choral recitation as and when I could. Then came my reception into the Dominican Third Order and the obligation to say our Lady's Hours, which, simpler and almost unvarying, are yet built on the same plan as the longer Office and provide an ideal guide and introduction to it. Later still came the possession of a Dominican breviary, the first tentative attempts at saying the Office on the bigger feasts, and eventually the time when I found that it was not whether I would or would not say the Divine Office daily, but simply that I could not bring myself to leaving off so doing.

And as a footnote to this personal account of the praying of the Divine Office, I should perhaps say that I always said our Lady's Hours in Latin, as I now say the Divine Office. I have only the sort of knowledge of Latin a science graduate might be expected to have remembered, but it is enough to rub along on, to sense the glittering beauty of the Latin phrases, and feel the unifying influence of a supranational tongue, linking all nations, all ages. It does not matter if I miss the sense of a word here and there, the thread remains unbroken, the mind is intent on God rather than on minor problems of translation or interpretation.

The first thing to realize about the Divine Office is that it is the communal prayer of the whole Church, of the Mystical Body

praying in and through our Lord, *per Dominum nostrum Jesum Christum*. Moreover, the whole Office is conceived in terms of a community at prayer; its psalms and hymns and responsories are meant for singing in choir, and for that reason I think it is important that one should, at least at the beginning, have opportunity to join in this choral singing or saying of the Office. Even without a book and very little knowledge of what was going on, the chanted Matins and Lauds of Christmas, or even said Vespers, left me with the sense of standing under a waterfall of prayer, caught up in something that reached out into eternity, into the choirs of heaven. Later on, when the friars were singing Compline one evening when there was exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, I saw this even more clearly, a figure of the blessed in heaven before the face of God. And sometimes, saying the Office alone one is in some way aware of not being alone, of joining in the prayers and praises of the whole Mystical Body.

If you follow the Liturgy of the Mass day by day, you are caught up into the liturgical year, into its moods, its dramatizations, its showing forth of Truth. Built round the Mass, the Office adds to and expands these themes and ideas; the weeks of Advent bring one closer to the mystery of the Incarnation; the Resurrection becomes more real to the mind under the teaching of the Easter Liturgy. The short commentary from one of the Fathers on the day's Gospel, read at Matins, helps one to understand its meaning, but it did more than that for me; it brought me to reading the Fathers. Agnostic, I had always believed that the Fathers of the Church were out-dated, with nothing to say to the twentieth century. The lessons at Matins were enough to show me that error, and to make me want to read more and more of them.

Then, very often, the lessons at Matins also include short extracts from the Old Testament, again enough to whet the appetite and send one back to the complete text. The series taken from the Minor Prophets in the month of November at once made me go back to the Bible for what happened next, and to find out more about the various writers. Again, the biographical second Nocturn lessons on the saints' days, whilst they are notoriously panegyric and traditional rather than critical historical accounts of each saint, do have a very definite and formative value. For they are tradition, and tradition is not to be despised,

they do hold up to us what Catholic tradition means by sanctity. The stress, in these comfort-loving days, on the penitential achievements of the saints is a continual reminder of the need for the cross in our own lives, and a spur to maintain and increase our personal penitential practices. 'Prayer cannot be accompanied by self-indulgence', wrote St Teresa of Avila (*Way of Perfection*) and the second Nocturn lessons are almost daily reminders of this basic fact of Catholic living.

Against the background of the psalms, the Church sets not only lessons and prayers, but antiphons and responsories with key themes, ideas for the different liturgical seasons. More than that, the way she selects psalms, extracts, passages from Scripture, provides a guide to the Bible itself. For the Church picks out happenings from the Old Testament which foreshadow the New and sets the two passages alongside each other; she points out the mystical meanings hidden under the literal text, the burning bush, the symbol of Mary's perpetual virginity, for example. Saying the Office not only helps to penetrate under the literal skin of Scripture; it makes one read the Bible through the eyes of the Church as it were.

The modern, non-Catholic, attitude to the psalms is that they are poetry of long ago and far away, unreal for today. Yet praying them daily discovers their timelessness. According to one's mood and circumstances, different verses become vital and real each day. Then too the poet's telling of God's dealings with the Chosen People in the distant past appears not as past history but as a symbol of his dealings with us now, and of the ways in which we respond or rebel.

Naturally enough, according to the period when they were composed and by whom, the quality of the Office varies on the different feast days. One cannot help a certain amount of literary criticism in one's prayers, or feeling that the text of the Office on certain days could stand a good deal of improvement! But those days are rare. Normally, the Office rises to the heights, and in so doing, provides a corrective, a rule of doctrine and prayer, to more sentimental 'popular devotions'. As against what appears to me as the often too human and too sentimental approach of the Stations of the Cross, I would like to set the gleaming brilliance of the Office for the Finding of the Holy Cross and Exaltation of the Holy Cross. For here the fundamental Christian

concept of the victory of Christ, of the glory of the cross, is set forth—aspects we could forget if we stress overmuch the human sufferings of our Lord. Right of course to recall and meditate on them, but we must see the whole picture, salute the holy cross, salute the victorious Crucified, salute the triumph of the King of the angels. For the Crucifixion is not only suffering, it is our Redemption, victory and triumph over the powers of evil, over death and darkness.

So too in these materially-minded days it is easy almost to forget all about the angels. We know they exist, but know it remotely; they form no vital part of our spiritual consciousness. But the Divine Office for the feasts of the angels is an immediate corrective; the splendour of angelic being shines in its inspired phrases and texts; it almost brings a vision of the angel hosts and makes us realize their place in the scheme of creation, their relation to God and to ourselves, their power to help us.

The Office is the prayer of the whole Church, of the Mystical Body; it must therefore help us forward in understanding the reality and the meaning of the Communion of Saints. It may do that very vividly; as when I said the Office for the Feast of all the Dominican Saints (November 12th) for the first time and it brought me of a sudden a kind of vision of the whole Order, of its saints in heaven and our community with them. Again, I have mentioned the extracts from the Fathers in the lessons at Matins; I would add how much the choice of passages from St Thomas Aquinas and St Albert, for instance, on their feast days,¹ helps one forward in getting to know these saints; the stimulating and refreshing effect of close-coupling prayer to them with reading some of the saints' own writing.

The Office is Scripture and doctrine prayed, it provides an endless source of subjects for further meditation, prayer and study, and because it does, it leads one on along the road to contemplation. Off and on, I would be aware of this, the words which had seemed dry and meaningless coming alive of a sudden as a hazel rod twists in a diviner's hands, and one's vision shifting out to God, to the saints, our Lady, the bright hosts of heaven. There are, of course, times when it is hard to say, and one wonders whether all has to be gone through today, tomorrow and again

¹ St Albert—November 15; St Thomas—feast of his patronage of Catholic schools, November 13.

the next day. But it is essential to stick to one's guns on these occasions and go on by an act of the will. Again, it does seem that the Office can provide a perfect counterpoise to the stress and turmoil of contemporary life. I do not think that the problem of finding time for it really looms as large as we would like to think; we find time for all our amusements, nor is there any real reason why, in case of need, we should not get up a trifle earlier in the morning. But it is important, I think, to do more than make time for saying the Office; one should try to relax while saying it, let go the stresses of the day, and drop quietly into the silent pool of contemplation, relax our straining efforts and let the Church's prayer carry us along.

For me, the Divine Office is a very easy way to pray. For the text is provided, a text of cool beauty making no impossible emotional demands as do prayer books of 'popular' piety, and the mind can either concentrate on the words, or the themes presented, or on God himself. The Rosary, where the basic meditation has to be constructed each time afresh by oneself, seems to be a much more difficult prayer. That more and more lay people are coming to love and use the Divine Office, or shortened versions of it, as their staple prayer, seems to me a very healthy sign in modern Catholic life. We can do nothing without prayer, and what better prayer than that of the whole Mystical Body of Christ? Yet much more needs to be done to help people to get to know and say the Office, and give them opportunities of being present at its recitation in choir, in which last matter I admit to having been rather exceptionally fortunate. Often, too, I wish that something further would be done to 'skim the cream' off the Divine Office (drawing on the special beauties of its variants, Roman, Dominican, Carmelite, and so on) and make them available in the vernacular for those with little time and less Latin. We all of us need to pray more and better, and for very many liturgical prayer is the easiest road. Again, I myself find that the simplest way to pray for the dead is to say the Office of the Dead.

The Divine Office is prayer, instruction, the life-bringing stream of the inspired word. It is the prayer of the Mystical Body addressing God through her Head and Lord; it cuts across national and temporal barriers, and once again the vision stands. 'I saw a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and

tribes, and peoples, and tongues: standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands: and they cried with a loud voice, saying: Salvation to our God, who sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and the ancients, and the four living creatures: and they fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God, saying: Amen: benediction, and glory, and wisdom and thanksgiving, honour, and power, and strength to our God for ever and ever.²

² Apoc. vii, 9.



THE WORD OF GOD INCARNATE¹

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ANY treatment of the Incarnation would obviously have to give some consideration to the two heresies which have distorted the truth contained in this mystery. At one extreme lies Arianism, which wanted to treat Christ as if he was exclusively human, with the divine about him no more than superimposed by a sort of adoption. At the other extreme is Docetism, which wanted to treat Christ as if he was exclusively divine, with the human about him only a sort of optical illusion. Both are heresies. The truth lies between the two extremes. Christ is the Word of God incarnate, one person in two complete natures, divine and human.

For an article appearing in a number devoted to BIBLE AND WORSHIP, this excursion into speculative theology will appear less enigmatic if it is realized that Christ was not the first time that the Word of God had become flesh. A sort of incarnation had taken place for over a thousand years beforehand, when the Word of God slowly took shape in the books which we accept as the Bible. And you can be as wrong about the Bible as you can about Christ. You can imagine that it is an exclusively human book which has been subsequently approved of and adopted by God—in which case I will call you a Biblical Arian. Or you can imagine that it is an exclusively divine work, with the various

¹ Reprinted with kind permission from *Scripture*, April 1958.