

A New 'Breviary'

280

by Bruce Harbert

The second Vatican Council, in its constitution on the Liturgy, initiated a reform of the Divine Office to adapt it to the needs of modern times. The amount of Office that those bound to the Breviary were obliged to recite was to be reduced, and it was stressed that the Office is intended to sanctify the whole day, so that each Hour should be recited at the time appropriate to it, Lauds and Vespers being seen as the most important Hours. The Council also emphasised that the Office is the common prayer of the whole Church, and urged secular clergy and laypeople as well as religious to come together to recite it in common.

The publication in 1970 of the *Liturgia Horarum*, the Latin version of the revised Divine Office, was a major step towards the fulfillment of the Council's intentions. It should not be seen as the end of the process, for liturgy as envisaged by the Council is a creative activity, demanding continual adaptation for the needs of particular groups and situations. For this reason, the *Liturgia Horarum* gives great scope for choice and adaptation: it is nearly always permissible to change the psalms, antiphons or readings to suit the individual or group that is celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours. This is emphasised in the fine 'General Instruction' with which the *Liturgia Horarum* is prefaced, a document that should be read by all for whom the Liturgy of the Hours forms a part of prayer. The published texts are a framework within which much variation is desirable and possible, and so a habit of reciting the Office that paid too much attention to discovering and observing precisely 'what is laid down in the book' would be alien to the spirit of the Council and its reformed liturgy.

Vernacular versions of the new Liturgy of the Hours have been available for some years now, but this year for the first time an English version of the entire *Liturgia Horarum* (including the General Instructions) is being published, entitled *The Divine Office*.¹ There will be three volumes, of which the first is now available, and prompts us to ask how valuable such a book can be in pursuing the Council's liturgical aims.

The format is handsome. The book is well bound in imitation leather, and falls open readily at any page. A light-weight paper has been used, whose off-white colour and matt finish are restful on the eyes, but which, being so thin, allows print to show through from the reverse of a page, which may make the book hard to read for anybody with failing eyesight. The text is printed in black, the rubrics in a reddish brown, and the layout is the work of Liam Miller, well known for his work as designer for the Dolmen Press. The publishers are to be congratulated for securing the services of so distinguished a

¹Published by Collins (London), Talbot Press (Dublin) and E. J. Dwyer (Sydney). Price £11.50 per volume.

designer. There are coloured cloth markers, and the pages have gilt edges, so that the whole aspect of the book is like that of a traditional Breviary. It measures well against the high standards of book production that we used to expect in the days of Latin liturgical books designed for long-term use. One further traditional feature could usefully have been adopted: the book might have been provided with a slip-cover to protect the delicate pages from damage.

The publishers are clearly aiming to capture a market: the large numbers of priests who had grown to love the old Breviary, and are weary of the makeshift forms of the Office in the vernacular that have been in use in recent years. They will buy *The Divine Office* with a feeling of relief and reassurance, and look forward to prayerful familiarity with it for many years to come. The traditional picture of the Catholic priest in his study or on a railway train reading his Breviary is one that we shall continue to see, but the book in his hands will be, not the *Breviarium Romanum*, but *The Divine Office*. Do the contents reach that high standard that we have a right to expect from a book that will play so central a role in the lives of so many for so long?

Firstly, translation. It is not possible to make a general judgement in this area, because the work has been done by so many different hands. For the Psalms, the Grail version has been used, with numerous adaptations to make them more suitable for singing. (This means, incidentally, that in communal celebration *The Divine Office* cannot be used in conjunction with any other Breviary, because the texts will not match.) For other passages of Scripture, Knox, *The Jerusalem Bible*, *The Revised Standard Version* and *Today's English Version* (*Good News for Modern Man*) have all been used. Most of the rest of the translations have been made especially for this volume, except that for the readings from post-biblical writers that form the second reading in the Office of Readings, already existing translations have often been used, with modernisation where necessary. We cannot expect perfection in liturgical translation, especially now, when Roman Catholics are only beginning to wrestle with the problems of using vernaculars in the liturgy. Each new body of liturgical English should be regarded as a contribution to a continuing experiment. This book contains both the excellent and the appalling. An example of the latter comes in the office for Christmas Eve. Both the antiphon to the Invitatory and the short responsory at Vespers begin: *Hodie sciatis quia veniet Dominus*, 'Today you shall know that the Lord will come'. The words echo a promise that God makes to his people repeatedly in the Old Testament, the promise that they will know him, and stresses that *today* this promise will come nearer to fulfilment in a special way: we look forward to the Midnight Mass as the celebration of Christ's coming. Today our advent expectations will begin to be fulfilled. *The Divine Office* destroys this resonance by translating the Invitatory antiphon 'Know today that the Lord

will come', and the responsory 'Today you know that the Lord will come', removing the note of expectation and promise. A pity, especially because Vespers of Christmas Eve is an office that one might hope many parishes would be able to celebrate publicly. By contrast, the prayers that conclude each office have been treated with special care. They are printed in sense-lines to facilitate reading aloud, and in many cases the translations of the collects are preferable to any currently available in translations of the Missal. To take one example at random, in the Saturday Office of Our Lady, 'Grant us, Lord, we pray, the joy of continued health of mind and body', with its directness and clarity, is the best attempt I have yet encountered at a rendering of the well-known *Praesta nos quaesumus Omnipotens Dues perpetua mentis et corporis sanitate gaudere*. If you doubt this, try to do better yourself, making sure that your version will fit well with the rest of the prayer.

The prayers in litany-form which come near the end of Lauds and Vespers are in this book inappropriately called 'Intercessions'—in fact at Lauds we pray mostly for ourselves at this point, and mostly for others only at Vespers. Perhaps 'suffrages' could have been used as a title. In many cases these short litanies bear no relation to their counterparts in the *Liturgia Horarum*, and are not translations at all but new compositions. This is quite in line with the rubrics except in one disappointing particular: the final petition at Vespers should always be for the dead, and this has often been neglected. So the *cum originali concordat* at the beginning of the volume should be taken with a pinch of salt.

The Divine Office departs from the Latin original also in the choice of hymns to begin the Office. Only a few of these are based on Latin hymns: most were first composed in English, and many are well known. An appendix contains a list of suggested tunes for singing them to. Another appendix contains an anthology of religious poems that can be used at the beginning of the Office in private recitation. Many of us would feel silly sitting alone and reading silently hymns that we are accustomed to singing in church, and this imaginative selection of poetry, which draws especially heavily of English poets of the seventeenth century, can help to give a meditative character to private recitation. It was a mistake to include in volume I, which covers Advent, Christmastide, and weeks 1-9 of the yearly cycle, poems especially chosen for their suitability for Lent and Easter. Their omission would have left room for other poems, and so have given more variety through the year.

One feature is particularly irritating to the lone user: the psalms are pointed for singing, and often the pointing suggests for a phrase a rhythm that is quite alien to the patterns of ordinary speech. Here is an example:

And gráaciousness is póured upón your líps (ps. 44)

This clause naturally has three main stresses in ordinary speech, and to stress the second syllable of *upon* is artificial, yet it is hard to resist the temptation to do so when the pointing so powerfully suggests that one should.

If you buy *The Divine Office*, you will have all that you need to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours. You will in fact have much more than you strictly need, for much of the volume is taken up with readings from the Office of Readings. Of these the first, scriptural reading could easily be found in one's own bible if one had a list of the passages given for each Office in the *Liturgia Horarum*, and the second, patristic or hagiographic, reading is rarely obligatory. It is quite in order to read through a Father of one's own choice, taking a page or two a day instead of the reading given in the *Liturgia Horarum*. But the readings given in the *Liturgia Horarum*, and hence in *The Divine Office*, because of the wide range of the material from which they are drawn, provide a valuable way of extending one's knowledge of Christian literature. It is useful to have so much in one volume, which one can always supplement from time to time by drawing on poets or religious prose-writers of one's own choice.

The very concept of a 'breviary' is a creation of the later Middle Ages, of the period when communal celebration of the Office gradually ceased to be the norm and more and more clerics turned to private recitation. The Council has tried to reverse this trend, to encourage all Catholics, not only religious, to see the Office as a communal prayer. We must therefore ask how useful *The Divine Office* will be in the pursuit of this goal. This is an important question for religious communities, of course, who will need to think hard before spending the large sums of money necessary to equip themselves with *The Divine Office*. It is important also for the laity and secular priests, if they are to celebrate the Office more often in common. It is surely desirable that this practice should grow in England. At retreats and conferences the Liturgy of the Hours no less than the Mass can be part of the common worship of the group, and used to foster a scriptural and liturgical piety. Parishes might consider celebrating Vespers publicly on Sundays as the Council desired, and celebrating the Office of Readings in the form of a Vigil before major feasts. There is no reason why such celebrations should not be joined to a Eucharistic service. On special occasions such as the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, some part of the Liturgy of the Hours could be used to give a scriptural and liturgical character to acts of worship that too often otherwise seem to have been hastily and untidily put together *ad hoc*. And it is surely time that some of our cathedrals, Westminster in particular, began to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours in a way that would encourage fuller participation by the faithful.

A highly desirable characteristic of public celebration of the Office is that it should be sung, and for this purpose *The Divine Office* is

ill-adapted. Although the Psalms are pointed for singing, the canticles are not, and so if these are to be sung, a separate copy will be needed with pointing. (Any attempt to write in pointing with pencil or ball-point would ruin the thin paper.) Antiphone and responsories also should be sung, and for this again a separate copy will be necessary. This need not contain all the antiphons and responsories in *The Divine Office*, since in most cases it is permissible for a group to change these to suit its needs. Groups can build up their own small repertoires of antiphons and responsories, which can be changed and added to as the years go by. Similarly, many groups will prefer to use a hymn book with tunes, rather than following the selection given in *The Divine Office*.

Arranging celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours can be a creative and enjoyable experience, to which many members of a group can direct their talents, musical, literary or organisational. One way of welcoming a new member to a group is to invite him or her to make some contribution to the creation of its liturgy. If such liturgical innovation as we have seen in England since the Council has too often been cheap, sensational and short-lived, this is partly because the spirit of the reforms to which the Council gave impetus has been imperfectly transmitted to this country. The initiative has been seized by publishers who, sensing widespread bewilderment and need for guidance have brought out a large quantity of new liturgical books, making available the new forms to people who remained uninstructed about the spirit that should give life to these forms. And so we live in the age of the missalette, of the lingering belief that liturgy is a matter of fixed forms emanating from a central authority, and that the local community has no creative role to play in liturgical life. The ossification that we have seen happen to the new form of Mass could equally well happen to the Liturgy of the Hours if too much reliance is placed on books such as *The Divine Office*. Many religious are tired of living with cyclostyled sheets of paper in choir. But this untidiness—and it need not be *great* untidiness—is the price they pay for keeping open opportunities of creativity and flexibility in their liturgy. Do away with the cyclostyled sheets in your community, equip yourselves with *The Divine Office*, and you may find that you have replaced an untidy liturgy by something much worse—a dead liturgy. Every religious community, and anybody responsible for communal celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours should possess one copy of *The Divine Office*, but should use it for guidance only, not as a repository of unchangeable forms. The work of liturgical renewal is never complete.