

## THE CANONICAL HOURS

The Church lives in time and with time. This truth is brought out beautifully in the canonical Hours. They provide a perfect way to consecrate the whole day to God and make it holy. The admonition of our Lord, that we are to pray and not grow weary, is thus perfectly fulfilled. For every part of the day the Church has drawn up a special prayer-form, an Hour, as it is called, that corresponds to the particular need of the day. The day is like a journey through an arid desert, but every three hours we come upon an oasis that offers us the water of grace and the cool refreshing shade of heavenly assistance. Spiritually we may revive ourselves at the canonical Hours of Prayer.

In order to understand what these divisions of the day are supposed to mean, it would be well to take a brief but thorough look into the history of their development. In the early centuries of the Church, in addition to the celebration of Mass, it was customary to hold a so-called vigil, which was a prayer service in three parts on the night before a feast day. From the vigil service developed three of our canonical Hours: Vespers, Matins, Lauds, inasmuch as the first was prayed the preceding evening, and the last was held in the early hours of the morning. This was the arrangement already in the days of Hippolytus (+236), and these were the first "Hours". In the Roman office the threefold division of Matins was re-introduced even after the vigil service had split into Vespers, Matins, and Lauds, and the divisions came to be known as night-watches or nocturns.

Corresponding to the three nocturns of Matins there are three daytime hours, Terce, Sext, and None. This makes three nocturns or nightwatches, three day hours, morning prayer (Lauds) and evening prayer (Vespers). The whole day is thereby sanctified in its principal divisions. There are and always have been Christians who actually pray these "Hours" at their corresponding times.

The two remaining Hours were added later, under the influence of monasticism. The monks prayed Matins during the night and said Lauds (morning prayer) in the early dawn, then went back to bed. When they rose later to begin the day's work, they felt the need for some sommon service to consecrate their labors to the Lord. Thus they developed Prime, a sort of second morning prayer. Vespers (evening prayer) were said in late afternoon, and then at bedtime there were devotions in the sleeping quarters (lessons, chapter of faults, abbot's blessing), which developed into Compline, a sort of second night prayer. With the addition of Compline, the development of the canonical Hours came to an end.

Today, then, we have three night Hours, three day Hours, two morning prayers, and two evening prayers - ten Hours. Eight of them sanctify successive three-hour intervals of the day, and in the Roman breviary each of the Hours has something of a three fold division, so that actually there is a special prayer aligned to each individual hour of the day. Vespers and Lauds are based upon a five-fold division; as morning and evening prayers, they are to introduce and conclude and be a crown upon the day's activity in the pursuit of holiness.

The next point is now to make these canonical Hours practical for personal spiritual progress. The breviary ought be a principal guide for my spiritual outlook and a means to sanctify my entire day's activity. This calls for the fullest possible application of the scheme of the Hours of Divine Office. The Hours can best be appreciated by exploring them one by one, in an effort to determine what is the chacteristic sentiment and theme of each, and as far as possible, how certain ones of them reflect various mysteries in the story of salvation.

The theme of a canonical Hour is that special thought or motivation to prayer that arises from the needs of that time of day; it is the Hour's prayer intention. The background from the story of salvation is the mystery or event which veers upon the Hour and should enter into the prayer intention while the Hour is being prayed; it should be an illustration for the text of the prayer, to channel and intensify the spirit of devotion (e.g., Tercescent of the Holy Spirit.)

### Matins

It is night. The turmoil of day has died away and everything is still. The church is at prayer. She remembers the night-time prayer of her Bride-groom; she thinks of the night vigils of the early Christians in the catacombs. Times have changed, but the Church continues to insist that night is not just for sleep; night is a time for prayer. From earliest ages Matins was the Church's prayer for the Second Coming; she prayed and waited for the return of Christ as Judge of all the world. Night is also a symbol of life on earth. We are like the virgins in the parable, waiting for the Bridegroom with our lamps in hand. Here is how the Christians of 200 A.D. felt about their Matins (text from Hippolytus, "Apostolic Tradition", c. 32, 19-27):

"About midnight, get out of your bed and wash and pray. Wash with clean water. If you have a wife, pray the psalms, alternating verses with her. If you have a wife and she is not yet a believer, go apart by yourself and pray alone, and then come back to your place with her. Even if you are bound by the bond of marital obligation, do not omit the prayer, for you're not sullied....

"It is very important that we pray at least once every hour; for the ancients have handed this practice down to us and taught us that this is how we are to keep watch. For at that hour all creation is at rest, praising God. Stars, trees, and waters are as if standing still. The whole host of angels keeps their service together with the souls of the just. They praise almighty God in that hour; and that is why the faithful on earth must pray at this same time.

"Our Lord in His parable put it this way: About midnight, He said, there came a call: Look! here comes the bridegroom! Go out to meet him! And He said more. Keep watch, then, He told them, for you do not know either the day or the hour in which the Son of Man is coming."

Unfortunately, we have to admit that today Matins retains its proper theme only to a very slight degree--Matins is generally very loosely connected with the night Hours and thus it can equally well be anticipated, that is, prayed on the day before, without any appreciable loss of devotion. In place of a theme proper to the time of day there is generally some theme from the feast being celebrated that day, a theme which is expressed in the readings (or lessons, as they are called) and the other variable parts. On feast days, Matins is a meditation on the feast, a drama of prayer.

In order to assimilate the full meaning of a feast, it is necessary to examine Matins. Many feast-day Matins are masterpieces of composition, for example, Office of the Dead, the consecration of a church, Corpus Christi. The psalms of seek-day Matins are mostly a prayerful meditation on the kingdom of God, a preparation for fitting the coming day into its proper place in the divine plan of redemption.

Matins has a splendid introduction, the invitatory, and on feast days, Sundays outside the penitential seasons, and during Eastertide, a grand conclusion, the "Te Deum".: The invitatory, or introduction song, combined with the powerfully stirring Psalm 94, is a liturgical masterpiece. But in order to sense the full, dramatic dynamism of the invitatory, one must hear it in its final form of development, sung in choir during the nightwatch of early dawn.

On Christmas, for example, the joyous tidings, *Christus natus est nobis* (Christ is born to us), resounds through the choir like a mighty proclamation, a veritable Gospel of good tidings in the still of the night, and a perfect overture to the solemnity of the day's liturgy. The "Te Deum" is the nœcan of the whole Church to the triune God, and to Jesus Christ; it ends on a fervent plea for protection. It serves as a beautiful transition to Lauds.

### LAUDS

Lauds is a jubilant Hour, fresh as the morning dew, perhaps the most beautiful of all the Hours. Its symbolism deserves attention. It is night; nature and men are asleep. In the far east the grey of dawn appears; then the ruddy hue of morning, the harbinger of a new day, spreads across the horizon, and the world of nature begins to stir. But all this natural beauty is only a symbol and reminder of a most wonderful event in the story of salvation. It was at this beautiful hour that our Savior burst the bonds of death. Resurrection--that is the background theme of Lauds. And the two pictures together, dawn and resurrection, remind us of a third arising from slumber, the spiritual awakening of the human soul.

There is, then, a threefold resurrection: nature awakens, the Savior rises from the dead, the human soul celebrates its spiritual resurrection. Such is the background of our prayer of Lauds. It is an explicit song of praise; praise is the Hour's central theme. If we can get a feeling for these three pictures intermingling in our Lauds prayer, if we can enter into the spirit of this threefold resurrection, if we can enlist the forces of nature to pray and praise and exult along with us while reciting this Hour reasonably early in the morning, perhaps even in the open air, then we are certain to be struck by the full impact of its meaning.

Lauds, is, actually, one of the most striking examples of what a proper observance of the characteristic thought of an Hour and the background theme from the story of salvation can do for personal devotion. The psalms at Lauds are all specially chosen hymns of praise.

Very frequently we find nature themes in the psalms. The thoughts of Christ's resurrection occur mostly in the antiphons at Lauds, where there is almost always an Alleluia. This feature we can observe particularly in Sunday Lauds, Sunday being the liturgical commemoration of the resurrection. The liturgical day and the liturgical hour of the resurrection coincide, and the references to Easter Day are doubled and tripled.

The climax of Lauds is the Gospel song, the Benedictus. It is a hymn in praise of man's redemption, a greeting to the dawning day of salvation which is destined to be one more step toward its completion. It is the Church who prays the Benedictus, taking Zachary's place. Every day is a new coming of the Redeemer, and the Church greets her Savior as the rising light of day, The divine Sun.

Sunday and feast-day Lauds are classically beautiful. First the praises of awakening nature before God the King upon His throne, the earth, decked with all the wonders of creation, Victor over the primeval chaos (Ps. 92); then a pious man in procession to the sanctuary (Ps. 99); morning prayer ("the bridesoul's morning kiss for the divine Bridegroom") Ps. 620; finally a joyous exclamation over the works of God's hands and the great symphony of praise that echoes through the Benedicite and Laudate.

## PRIME

Prime is the Church's second morning prayer, quite different in tone from Lauds. Lauds is the ideal morning prayer, a "resurrection song" of all creation and of the Church. Prime is the morning prayer of a sinful human, a subjective prayer. The basic theme of Prime is dedication of and preparation for the day's labors and conflicts. This theme runs through the whole Hour.

There is no special reference to any chapter in the story of salvation. Thus, the theme of the canonical Hour, preparing for the day, assumes the center of attention, and indeed to such an extent that even on feast days, themes proper to the feast are generally suppressed at Prime. The hymn at Prime enlists all our efforts and abilities in the service of the Lord and arms us against imminent dangers--- perfectly in harmony with Prime's basic theme.

This Hour also contains a rather lengthy invariable set of prayers that form the real essence of the morning prayer. After the psalmody (singing of the psalms) comes a conclusion which Prime has in common with the other Little Hours (Terce, Sext, None): chapter, responsory, versicle, prayer. The chapter "To the King of the ages..." is an oath of allegiance to Him who is Sovereign in God's kingdom. The responsory is a fervent plea for the realization of human weakness. The blind man of Jericho is sitting along the road as Jesus passes by, shouting at the top of his lungs. I am that blind beggar and the Lord is passing by this very day.

The beautiful prayer which follows never changes. It contains all the elements of a good morning prayer, thanks, petition, good intention, preparation for the coming day, and particularly the touching plea to be spared the guilt of sin throughout the day. With this prayer the first part of Prime closes, the so-called "office of the choir."

Now the monks would go into the chapter room for their daily "chapter", and hold the "office of the chapter". This comprised four chief points which are still to be found in the second part of Prime.

1. Reading of the martyrology, the official list of members of the Church who have been declared saints. It is a fine psychological touch to place the heroes of the day as models before our eyes at the very moment when the day's activity officially begins.

2. Distribution of the work and instructions. The abbot would give the monks their daily work assignments. The prayers and verses that follow are leftovers from this ceremony and are full of beautiful references to a good intention for the day.

3. Reading of the chapter: a "chapter" of the rule or a text from Scripture.

4. The blessing of the father of the house (the abbot); as God's children we receive a paternal blessing before setting out to work. This blessing is given twice in the office; at Prime at the beginning of the day and at Compline at the

day's end. Prime also stands as the hourly prayer for the three hours that follow (six to nine o'clock). Note the beautiful blessing formula immediately preceding the chapter; it is a concise and striking expression of Prime's basic theme as preparation for the day's activity. May the almighty Lord order our days and doings in His peace. Amen.

#### PERCE

9 o'clock. The Church wants us to pause briefly during our day's activity and raise our hearts to God; that is the purpose underlying the Little Hours. They are a chance to catch our breath, and oasis in our desert wanderings. It is important that we do not pray them all at once, but whenever possible we should pray them at the corresponding hour of the day as a renewed consecration of the day's work. The Little Hours are short, because the day is for work.

The story of salvation has a role to play in Terce. It was the third hour (9:00) when the Holy Spirit came down upon the young Christian community on Pentecost Sunday (Pentecost Terce begins with the hymn, Veni Creator). Quite appropriately, the Church recalls this mystery in the Hour of Terce. Terce is thus the first Confirmation, "a strengthening for the conflicts of the day." It is a "Come, Holy Spirit" upon the day's work. The Hour's theme is invocation of the Holy Spirit. The hymns proper to the Little Hours are a further development of the theme proper to each and to the corresponding time of day.

#### SEXT

12:00 noon. Theme of the Hour. The day's conflict is at its climax, the heat of passion is at its strongest, the powers of hell have greater influence over man, our lower nature seems to have gained mastery. Theme from the story of salvation. The Savior is hanging on the Cross (12:00 to 3:00); hell is bringing all its forces to bear against Him. This scene from Good Friday is the background for Sext; foreground is the battle against sin in us and in the Church. "Lead us not into temptation" is the message of this Hour.

#### NONE

3:00 to 6:00. This day of salvation is slowly beginning its decline. Our thoughts are taken up with the end of life. Looking to my future I ask, will I persevere? Perseverance is the Hour's theme. There is no theme from the story of salvation. At the most there is eschatological shading--the last things.

#### VESPERS

Vespers is the Church's evening prayer. It is very similar to Lauds, both in construction and in basic theme. The Church looks back on the day of salvation just passed with all its redeeming graces--and is fervently grateful. Vespers is a thanksgiving prayer. Thanksgiving is the principal theme, the Magnificat is the climax, the great thanksgiving song of the Church. The canonical Hour theme is this, thanks be to God for the day just passed, both in the soul and in the Church, thanks for all His saving graces.

There is also a theme from the story of salvation to be found in Vespers--the Last Supper. At the very same time that Vespers is prayed, Christ was seated with His apostles in the upper room. This gives Vespers a special connection with the holy Eucharist, and as a matter of fact, a great number of the Vesper psalms are Eucharistic songs or at least can easily be referred to the Eucharist. This is particularly true of the so-called Hallel psalms (Psalms 112-117), which were sung at the Last Supper, and the Gradual psalms (Psalms 119-131) which were procession songs for pilgrimages to the temple. The Last Supper is itself a symbol of the heavenly banquet.

There is one big difference between Vespers and Lauds: whereas the psalms of Lauds are all especially chosen, songs, the Vesper psalms merely follow a numerical sequence in the psalter. They are not a series of thanksgiving hymns exclusively, as perhaps we might have expected.

#### COMPLINE

Compline is the Church's second evening prayer, and as opposed to Vespers, it is a subjective and individual prayer for the sinful soul who wants to make her peace with God. The Hour is a masterpiece of construction, the work of St. Benedict; we might call it the ideal night prayer.

Particularly beautiful is the symbolism of Compline. The hour begins uniquely without introduction, and at once halts for an examination of conscience and an act of contrition.

Light and sun are favorite. Scriptural and liturgical symbols of God, Christ, the divine life. Christ is the divine Sun, the Christian is a child of the Sun. These thoughts are to be found frequently in the Hours. But also the opposite of light, night and darkness, is a frequent liturgical symbol for the sinister powers of hell. It is this night theme that sets the tone for all of Compline. In darkness we recognize the element of the devil; night is the cloak for the prince of the world. The child of God, being a creature of light, is afraid of the night. Like a tiny chick he huddles beneath his mother's wings; there he is safe from the attacks of the hawk, Satan.

It is important to notice that our liturgical prayer thinks not only of ourselves, but of all our fellow men; for them too, it is evening now, an evening of temptation, sin, death. It is a matter of experience for all of us that the devil particularly likes to use the hours of night for setting the snares of his temptations. It is almost as if hell were denopulated every evening and hosts of evil spirits came as agents of sin to plague the earth. How many sins does not night cover with her thick black veil? The religious soul prays this night prayer for his own protection from the powers of darkness and for all souls, everywhere.

Sleep, too, is a symbol, an image of death. Spontaneously we think of death when we go to sleep--Compline is also a night prayer to life, a plea for a happy death. It is precisely in this setting that it contains some splendid thoughts. The short and meaningful blessing at the beginning of Compline expresses the double application of the night prayer very concisely: "May the almighty Lord grant us a peaceful night and a perfect end." Background from the story of salvation is the agony of Jesus in Gethsemane; we pray Compline for the Gethsemane; we pray Compline for the Gethsemane hours in our life.

Thus, the Hour expresses earnest petition; contrition, plea for protection, and deepest confidence are its main elements. Particularly beautiful is the invariable part which immediately follows the psalms. First there is a night prayer hymn, then the consoling chapter. "You are in our midst." Jesus is in our midst, it is in His name we are gathered. Do not forsake us. That is the main theme, the chief petition--it is repeated and amplified in the responsory that follows.

Two images of death come next: the first, Jesus hanging on the Cross and uttering His last words: "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit. We pray the very same words, repeatedly, from our heart."

Father, Redeemer, into Your Hands I now commend my sould for this night-time of the day, of my life, of my soul. The following versicle stresses two particularly apt images for night time. a) Guard us like the apple of Your eye. We need protection just as much as the delicate organism of the eye, and we hope to be as dear to God as His own eye. b) Shelter me in the shadow of Your wings. Like little chicks running for shelter to the mother hen-

Another reference to death occurs in the canticle from the Gospel, old Simcon's swan song. He holds the child Jesus in his hands, his dearest longing has just been fulfilled; he has seen the Redeemer and now he begs to be dismissed from his lifelong service to God. We are in a similar position: we bear the mystical Savior in our hands and in our hearts, the saving graces of the day. Our eyes have seen "his salvation," the divine "light" has risen for us, Christ is our "glory." Now we, too, can pray to be dismissed from service; it is the night of rest that follows the day's work. We are God's hired laborers and we must be ready every day to be dismissed by Him. These two themes of death are magnificently done.

The antiphon to Simcon's canticle is also very rich. Bodily and spiritual waking and sleeping intermingle: Protect us, Lord, while we are awake and safeguard us while we sleep (at night), that we may keep watch with Christ (in life, through grace) and rest in peace (by a happy death).

Again and again, we cannot help notice that Compline is a night prayer and a prayer for a happy death.

The Compline oration sums up all the day's prayer themes into one concise and full petition. It contains four points:

1. Visitation---God is invited to dwell with us by the presence of his grace and His protection. Just as the God of the Covenant once dwelt with His people in the middle of the desert, that is how we want God to visit us and live with us.
2. God is also the guardian of the citidel of our soul--He must be begged to keep its portals closed against enemies.
3. The angels, too, our guardian angels, are invited to dwell in this house. And suddenly the dream of Jacob comes to mind again, the ladder to heaven and the angels going up and down upon it, carrying prayers and good works to heaven, bringing grace and comfort down to us.
4. May God's paternal blessing be upon us all throughout the night.

Then our night prayer dies slowly away. A few versicles, the blessing of the heavenly Father in the blessing of the father of our religious family. Thereupon a parting adieu to your heavenly mother, Mary, one of the Marian antiphons, each more beautiful than the preceding. No further sound from the choir. The "great silence" has begun.

# THE CANONICAL HOURS

HOURS	MATINS	LAUDS	PRIME	TERCE	SEXT	NONE	VESPERS	COMPLINE
TIME	12:00 PM 3:00 AM	3:00 AM 6:00 AM	6:00 AM 9:00 AM	9:00 AM 12:00 AM	12:00 AM 3:00 PM	3:00 PM 6:00 PM	6:00 PM 9:00 PM	9:00 PM 12:00 PM
THEME	CONSECRATION OF THE RISING DAY	JOYFUL PRAISE FOR SPIRITUAL AWAKENING	PREPARATION FOR THE DAY'S WORK	HOLY SPIRIT, DESCEND ON US	LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION	UNSTINTED OBEDIENCE TO THE FATHER	GRATEFUL THANKS FOR SAVING GRACES	PROTECTION FOR THE COMING NIGHT
MOOD	WATCHFUL	JUBILANT	DEDICATORY	INOCATIVE	PASSIONATE	SUSTAINING	GRATEFUL	PENITENT
MYSTERY	RETURN OF CHRIST	RESURRECTION OF JESUS	ABSOLUTION OF GUILT	DESCENT OF SPIRIT	CHRIST ON CROSS	CROWN OF TRIUMPH	CHALICE OF SALVATION	JESUS OF GETHSEMANE
PARTS OF THE OFFICE	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY	INVITATORY
		PSALMS	MEDITATION	MEDITATION	MEDITATION		PSALMS	
	MEDITATION	LESSON	MEDITATION	MEDITATION	MEDITATION	MEDITATION	LESSON	MEDITATION
		HYMN					HYMN	
	BENEDICTUS	TE DEUM	BENEDICTUS	BENEDICTUS	BENEDICTUS	BENEDICTUS	BENEDICTUS	BENEDICTUS