

## THE EMBRACING PRAYER

A LAYMAN

**A**N article on 'The Divine Office as a Method of Prayer' in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*, August 1951, by Dom Bede Griffiths, impressed me as having much to say that is of use to all Christians both lay and religious, especially in these times when a slow but deep-seated revolution in spirituality is taking place. Perhaps, however, the most significant sentence of all comes in the opening paragraph. After telling the story of the young priest who studied the psalms so carefully that to him they ceased to be prayers at all, the writer says:

'This is perhaps an extreme example, but it illustrates a fact of great importance, namely, that prayer is not necessarily an exercise of discursive thought, and the study of a certain kind can be an obstacle rather than an assistance to prayer.'

This is interesting indeed, because the objection immediately made to any suggestion that the laity might be encouraged to use the Divine Office as a private prayer in English has been the obscurity of the psalms and the difficulty of expounding them to the uninstructed. So, as a general rule, the people are cut off from and completely ignorant of what St Ambrose called 'a blessing for the people . . . the praise of God, the tribute of the nation, the common language of all . . . the voice of the Church', of the prayers which, the Holy Father says in *Mediator Dei*, 'encompass the full round of the day and sanctify it'. I venture, therefore, to offer as a footnote to this article the experience of one insignificant layman in a search for prayer and the discovery of it in the Divine Office.

The first introduction to the psalms—or rather the first view of them in their proper perspective—came through the missal. It always seems logical to begin a book at the beginning, and at the beginning of every missal is the 'Preparation for Mass', which consists first and foremost of psalms, some of the most beautiful in the psalter. 'How lovely are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts! My soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord.' Is there any better introduction to the Mass than Psalm 83? Does it really need a lot of expounding and explanation before it can enter the mind as a prayer?

So they go on. 'Convert us, O God our Saviour; and turn away thy anger from us' (84); For thou, O Lord, art sweet and mild: and plenteous in mercy unto all that call upon Thee' (85). Then, like a flash of light in the following psalm, 115, we come upon, 'What shall I render to the Lord for all the things he has rendered to me: I will take the chalice of salvation; and I will call upon the Lord.' The mind leaps forward to the very heart and climax of the Mass when the priest prepares to receive the Precious Blood with those very words, first inspired centuries before the Mass was instituted. More than anything does that declare the extraordinary and prophetic manner in which the psalms are linked up with Christian prayer and worship. The Mass indeed in all its parts, variable and non-variable, is built up on the psalms; they lead up to it directly and precisely out of the long past of the Chosen Race; and in the liturgical order of the Christian day they frame the Mass, as it were, in a crescendo of preparation and in the quiet aftermath of the evening hours.

The next step, quite by chance, is Compline, learnt and sung at a summer school of the Society of St Gregory. Here for the first time is a glimpse of the shape and content of the Divine Office. (I do not think anybody should be surprised at this ignorance; I have since found it in almost every Catholic I know.) In the serene, melodious cadences and steady business-like rhythm of the chant is experienced almost exactly that particular influence of the Divine Office described by Father Bede in that same article of his: 'The regular recitation of the psalms, whether to oneself or in choir, can create a rhythm which after a short time will be found to produce a state of recollection quite naturally.' And in that great cry of hope and trust, Psalm 90, we come across that link with the Gospels—quoted so aptly by the devil—as he always can!—'For he hath given his angels charge concerning thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. In their hands they shall bear thee up lest perhaps thou stumble against a stone.' All these sudden points of contact bring a realization of the unity of the whole structure of the Church, the unbreakable link between the Old Testament and the New, and an appreciation of the historical reality of the whole thing. These quick meditations are a definite help to prayer and give life to the words quite apart from their meaning.

Compline and Vespers can be enjoyed at a summer school, but in how few public churches in Catholic England can they be so

enjoyed? So it had to be private recitation; a little book, *Benedictine Hours*, is very useful for that and adds Terce to the repertoire. At every enlargement so there is an expanding of appreciation and a tightening of contract: all the Introits to Mass are psalms, but it took the reading of 'I spake of thy testimonies before kings and was not ashamed' (Ps. 118, Terce of Sunday in the Benedictine Office) and its identification with *Loquebar de testimoniis tuis in conspectu regum*, of the Common of a Virgin and Martyr to bring them all into their context.

It seemed impossible to get hold of Prime (this is post-war). The C.T.S. had issued a little pamphlet of it but it was out of print and not likely to be re-issued: no demand for it. The *Horae Diurnae* was available, but expensive, and English was necessary. Father Bede is right when he says that it is the rhythm of the words that counts as much as the meaning; but still it is through the English that the ordinary person receives the notion of contact with the praying Church. So Terce was said before Mass every morning, followed by the 'Preparation' in the missal; and Compline at night. That was all there seemed time for in a full day, but even this limited effort gave a knowledge of unity with all the Church in praise and prayer.

Then, again by a lucky chance, there was acquired the whole Roman Breviary in English (published in 1937 and practically unobtainable now). There opened out new vistas of prayer and knowledge. The first psalm of Prime on Sunday (117) led straight into the Easter liturgy: 'This is the day that the Lord hath made . . .', straight to one of the sublime truths of the Gospels: 'The stone which the builders rejected; the same is become the head of the corner.' Prime of Wednesday had the Lavabo of the Mass: 'I will wash my hands among the innocent: and will compass thy altar, O Lord' (Ps. 25). Dotted about the psalms, like old friends, are so many familiar versicles and responsories: Compline, Thursday, 'O God, come to my assistance: O Lord, make haste to help me' (Ps. 69); Vespers, Tuesday, 'Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth' (Ps. 123). Every Friday at Prime those terrible phrases pound the soul: 'But I am a worm and no man: the reproach of men and the outcast of the people. All they that saw me have laughed to scorn: they have spoken with their lips and wagged the head.' And—the Jews can be heard grimly fulfilling the prophecy to the letter—'He hoped in the

Lord, let him deliver him.' A few lines further on are the words read so often in the Passion and repeated in the *En Ego*. 'They have dug my hands and feet, they have numbered all my bones . . . They parted my garments amongst them: and upon my vesture they cast lots.'

So, link by link as the Hours are read is forged that chain of prayer and prophecy which binds together the Gospels, the Psalms and the Mass, that complex unity which is the heart and circumference of the Faith. Now Prime and Terce are said in the morning before Mass; it means getting up earlier but the reward of grace is one that can be felt. On Sundays it is possible to add the other Hours, Sext and None, to the Thanksgiving. Whenever feasible, for instance on a long train journey, the whole Office can be said. Compline of Sunday is committed to memory in Latin according to the Benedictine Office, and can be said anywhere—usually in the Underground coming home from work, when in spite of distractions, it seems to round off the day.

In a Protestant childhood the psalms were a meaningless monotony. Seen now in their true context, without any exegetical or linguistic study, the discovery is made that their repetition never palls; every week as the familiar words come round they come as new, bringing new thoughts and contacts, fresh inspirations. The flow is inexhaustible, and one appreciates as never before the preoccupation of the psalmist with water and fountains as images, and sees the source of the imagery of the saints, such as Teresa of Avila and many others. The whole sequence and order of the Office is a living stream.

Moreover, closer acquaintance with the Breviary brings one also in touch with the Fathers of the Church, with all the Old Testament, with the Gospels and the Epistles, in the Lessons at the Nocturns, so one not only reaches to the source of all modern spiritual writing but finds oneself really taking part in the liturgical cycle of the Church and in a small and still inadequate way of applying that desire of the Holy Father in *Mediator Dei*: 'Let the souls of Christians be like altars on each one of which a different phase of the sacrifice, offered by the High Priest, comes to life again, as it were. . . .'

I hope that these inadequate comments will lead other lay people to discover the treasures of the Divine Office and gain from them all that I have gained. I hope too that they may

induce priests to encourage those who show interest and help them to find their way through the intricacies of the Rubrics, for the Office is, as Father Bede says, an exceedingly complex structure; but once mastered it does provide for simple people an unfailing source of prayer and devotion which never cloys and which becomes not exactly automatic but regular and self-absorbing.

I think too that the liturgical movement would gain much if, instead of insisting so much on music and so on, organizers of schools and conferences would give practical instruction on the Breviary itself, how to apply the instructions of the Ordo, sponsor articles on those lines, and get more and more people to take part in the recital of the Office in English. It is surely in the interest of the Church that people should clearly comprehend the catholic and communal nature of the Divine Office; that it is indeed 'a prayer which embraces all mankind and reveals the meaning of all history'.



## HUGH OF SAINT VICTOR ON THE CELESTIAL HIERARCHY OF DENYS THE AREOPAGITE

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*Hugh of Saint-Victor's Commentary on Denys' Celestial Hierarchies profoundly influenced the writers on mystical theology of the twelfth and following centuries. Richard is greatly indebted to him and makes use of his ideas and his examples. The following extract from the section on the Seraphim in Book VI of the Commentary (chapter VII in Denys) shows how Hugh transferred what Denys said of Angels to human love and contemplation. The insistence on love rather than knowledge as the means of union and contemplation far outstrips what Denys thought and is responsible for the whole of the later trend of mystical theories. This passage is the source of many of Richard's illustrations in the Benjamin Major. Hugh's commentary on this section is longer than that on any other part of the work and he obviously lets himself go freely on the subject which was dearest to his heart.*

*The translation of the appropriate sentences of Denys is taken from that published by the Editors of the 'Shrine of Wisdom' in their version of the Mystical Theology and Celestial Hierarchies. (Brook, 1949.)*