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THE ORIGIN, SYMBOLISM, AND PURPOSE
OF THE CANONICAL HOURS

by

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with introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

Distraction in prayer is possibly the most common of self accusations. Even the saints are not immune. Imagination, says St. Teresa, is a donkey, whom the rider must constantly pull back to the beaten pathway.

But imagination can turn from enemy to friend. Let it be filled with pictures of the past, with visions of the ever present beauties of God, with enthusiasm for its future Home of Song. Imagination, thus employed, enters into the joys of its lord, i.e., of the mind and the will which prays.

The pages which follow, devoted to the origin, symbolism, and purpose of the canonical hours, will be welcomed not only by those who are bound to the Office but likewise by all who would pray as Christ prays.

Patrick Cummins, O.S.B.

The Fifth Sunday after Easter
1951.

THE ORIGIN, SYMBOLISM, AND PURPOSE
OF THE CANONICAL HOURS

"Sing wisely." The words contain a perpetual and tremendous challenge. "Sing wisely." How difficult is the fulfillment of the simple admonition of the psalmist. Even with the good intentions of hearts desirous of serving God we find that so frequently every day we are not singing wisely but carelessly and with minds distracted far from the meaning of the words which our lips are pronouncing.

"Sing wisely." Sooner or later in our lives we come to realize that giving heed to this admonition includes more than an honest attempt to pay attention while actually praying the Breviary. We come to realize that such attention is impossible unless at other times, at all times, we strive to make God, as revealed to us in the Psalter, the center of our lives. This task requires labor, hard and joyous labor. It requires much prayerful study of the Scriptures and of the Breviary.

The author of the following pages has thought to help himself sing wisely by an investigation of the origin, symbolism and purpose of the canonical hours. Surely an understanding of the reasons which led to the establishment of the different hours and of their meaning

and purpose is an immense aid in praying the Office. Such has been the author's thought and expectation and his hope has not been disappointed.

From viewpoint of origins the canonical hours fall into three distinct groups: the nocturnal group, consisting of Matins, Lauds, and Vespers; the diurnal group, made up of Tierce, Sext, and None; and finally the group which we might term "monastic," that of Prime and Compline. Each of these three groups was brought to life by an entirely different set of circumstances, and the proximate purpose of this paper now becomes a narration of those circumstances together with an explanation of the symbolism and purpose of the resulting hours of prayer.

THE NOCTURNAL GROUP

MATINS

Of the three groups the nocturnal group alone dates back to apostolic times.¹ At the time of the Apostles the three hours which now make up this group formed but one hour. The institution of the early nocturnal assembly for prayer resulted from a frame of mind which is once engendered by and expressed in such Scriptural quotations as the following:

"He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God."²

"He told them . . . that they must pray always and not lose heart."³

"Pray, that you may not enter into temptation."⁴

"The Lord is to come as a thief in the night."⁵

"Watch, therefore, for you do not know when the Master of the house is coming, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or early in the morning; lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. And what I say to you, I say to all, 'Watch.'"⁶

"But at midnight, however, Paul and Silas were praying, singing the praises of God."⁷

1. We shall see, however, that the diurnal group has its beginnings in practices of the apostolic times.

2. Luke 6:12.

3. Luke 18:1.

4. Luke 22:40.

5. I Thess. 5:2.

6. Mark 13:35.

7. Acts 16:25.

And lastly, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins.⁸

Commenting on the verse of Psalm 118, Media nocte sur-
gebam ad confitendum tibi, St. Ambrose gives an eloquent
epitome of this attitude of mind. He says:

"At the middle of the night," says the Pro-
phet, "I rose to confess to You because of Your
just judgments." To pray during the day does
not suffice, but we must rise at night, even
at the middle of the night. Our Lord Himself
spent the night in prayer that by His own ex-
ample He might encourage us to pray. . . .

"At the middle of the night I rose," he
says, teaching us that we also must rise at
the middle of the night. And that which he
adds, "that I might confess to you," also has
a lesson for us, for we learn that at that time
especially we must pray to God and weep for our
sins. Nor are we merely to ask forgiveness for
past sins but we must ask for the strength to
turn away from present sins and to avoid future
sins.

At midnight many temptations stalk us. The
lusts of the flesh flame forth. The Temptor has
his sport, for while the strength of the body
is consumed in digesting food and drink the sto-
mach grows weak, the mind drowsy, the desire for
sleep grows strong, and the vigilant do not have
that full strength which would enable them to
resist the attacks of error.

And so at midnight the Temptor is at hand. He
casts out his nets hoping to agitate the unpre-
pared mind. He invades the darkness of midnight
with evil spirits who urge us to commit every
wicked act now when there is no observer, none
to see the crime, no witness of error. He
fills us weary sinners with mental turmoil and,
if we resist, he brings forth the example of the
saints who once sinned but afterwards obtained
forgiveness and covered their past sins. For al-
though he detests correction of faults, never-
theless, in order to overcome the strength of a
sober mind and to draw it on to sin, he for a

8. Matt. 25:1-13.

time holds forth the promise of future pardon. And, if after he has wrested assent to sin, he sees us wishing to reject sin, not, indeed, from love of virtue but from contemplation of punishment, he fills our minds with subtle arguments so that we say to ourselves, "Who sees me? Whom shall I fear? Darkness and walls surround me."⁹ The Most High sees me not. Our sins come not to His notice for He does not deign to look upon what is foul." Indeed, all these things we know from experience and observation, for none can be without temptation.

Moreover, just as night is the time of temptations, so also is it the time of punishment, as we learn from the Scriptures. Although He was able at any moment to exterminate the firstborn of the Egyptians, Our Lord God with good reason judged that this was the more opportune time to inflict grief and lamentation on the sinner. It is written that the firstborn children of the Egyptians would be killed by the destroying angel at midnight.¹⁰ Moses, the holy prophet, therefore, in order that the angel might pass over without harming the Hebrews, anticipated this time by sacrificing a lamb at vespers. Thus by eating the lamb and celebrating the passing over of the Lord, the Hebrews escaped the vengeance of the Lord and were not caught unarmed and void of spiritual nourishment by the darksome enemy's arrows of night.

We must give diligent attention to all these events. . . for they are all written down for a purpose. They reveal divine mysteries to us. We too must anticipate the snares of the temptor by celebrating beforehand the celestial banquet. . . . We must be prepared for the midnight hour. We must fortify ourselves by eating the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus, which brings remission of sins, reconciliation with God, and eternal protection.

9. Eccius. 23:25-26.

10. Ex. 12:29.

Before the midnight hour, therefore, let us receive our Lord Jesus Christ, the guest of our souls. . . . Then when the adversary sees that our guest chamber is occupied by the lightning-like brilliance of the heavenly presence he will know that through Christ the place has been shut to his temptations. He will depart in flight, and we will pass the midnight hour without any harm.

The offering of the evening sacrifice will also help us to be mindful of Christ. When we retire at night we will not forget that Lord to whom we poured forth our prayers at sunset and who has satisfied our hunger with the banquet of His own body. And what we meditate upon at the evening hour we will quickly recall when we rise for vigil. Our Lord Jesus will Himself wake us. At midnight when the enemy usually makes his attacks He will encourage us to rise and to take up the arms of prayer.

Whence with good reason Paul, the apostle, and Silas, when cast into prison, although their feet were secured in stocks, nevertheless by the fleet steps of their mind rose at midnight to pray to the Lord and to offer the sacrifice of praise. And, therefore, where the duty of devotion was not lacking neither were the means of escape. Suddenly at midnight there was a great earthquake. The foundations of the prison were shaken. The doors were ripped open. The chains of all fell loose.

Is there not a lesson for us in this story? Are we not able, if bound, to free ourselves by the hands of prayer? We must rise up, therefore, and pray. It is the hour at which wickedness makes its attack and at which the Temptor inflicts his wounds. But it is also the hour at which the means of escape from severe temptations come from heaven.

We must rise from our bed at midnight lest we be overcome by deceit. We must see to it that at that time when we can be conquered we do not lose the occasion of conquering. . . . So let us take care lest the darksome and foul prince of this world fill us with his temptations. Let us rise and awaken our mind. He

will not sleep who guards us if He does not find us sleeping. He will rise if we ourselves rise to keep vigil, and He will command the wind and a great tranquillity will possess us who are tossed about by the whirlwinds of storm.

We must rise. The Spouse comes at midnight. We must beware lest He find us sleeping; lest we sleep and be unable to light our lamp. We must rise, I say, and confess to the Lord and give thanks. We must praise His eternal judgments. . . .and those whom He has placed nude and unadorned in the infirmity of the body He will protect and cover with strength of soul and with the riches of His mercy.¹¹

11. P.L. XV, 1313-16. St. Ambrose offers many difficulties to the translator. The above is not a literal translation. In striving for readable English I have been forced to take some liberties with the Latin text, but I have been absolutely faithful, so I believe, to the meaning of the original.

Notice that Ambrose says that midnight prayer is necessary because: (1) Christ will return at midnight; (2) we must imitate Christ and the Apostles who prayed at midnight; (3) midnight is the hour when we most especially suffer temptation. His seeming overemphasis of this last point will be treated later on in the paper.

Cf. also St. Jerome's letter to Riparius (CIX); Nicene Fathers, VI, p. 213.

You tell me further that Vigilantius execrates vigils. In this surely he goes contrary to his name. The wakeful one wishes to sleep and will not hearken to the Savior's words, "What, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is will but the flesh is weak" (Matt. 26:40-1). . . . We read also in the gospel how the Lord spent whole nights in prayer, (Luke 6:12) and how the apostles when they were shut up in prison kept vigil all night long, singing their psalms until the earth quaked, and the keeper of the prison believed, and the magistrates and the citizens were filled with terror, (Acts 16:25-38). Paul says: "Continue in prayer and watch in the same" (Col. 4:2), and in another place he speaks of himself as "in watchings often"

At root the inspiration of nightly vigils was the belief in an imminent parousia.¹² The early Christians were thoroughly convinced that it was only a matter of months or, perhaps, of a few years until Christ would return in glory. They sincerely believed that they themselves would live to see His parousia and to be snatched up into glory with Him. Witness Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians written to that community because the Christians were so convinced of the imminence of the parousia that they refused to work, to build houses, etc.¹³ Their break with the world had been to complete!

The common belief had it, furthermore, that just as He had risen from the dead on the night before Easter morn so would He return in glory on that night. It was fitting,

(II Cor. 11:27). Vigilantius may sleep if he pleases and may choke in his sleep, destroyed by the destroyed of Egypt and of the Egyptians. But let us say with David, "Behold, He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps. CXXI, 4). So will the Holy One and the Watcher come to us. And if ever by reason of our sins He fall asleep, let us say to Him, "Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?" (Ps. XLIV, 23) and when our ship is tossed by the waves let us rouse Him and say, "Master, save us: we perish" (Matt. 8:25).

12. Cf. Cabrol, Liturgical Prayer, Its History & Spirit, p. 143. Cf. also, Batifol, History of the Roman Breviary (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912), pp. 1-3.

13. Hoisner, Paul of Tarsus (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946), pp. 253-261.

therefore, that on this night the Christians should keep all night vigil waiting for Christ. It was meet that they should pass the night in prayer even as Christ did, praying always, not giving way to faint-heartedness, lest they enter into temptation. Perhaps this very night the Groom would come as the unexpected thief at midnight! They must be ready!

This tradition of Christ's return on Holy Saturday night and the consequent all night vigil seems to be of apostolic origin. St. Jerome in his commentary on Matthew's "And at midnight there was a cry: Behold the bridegroom comes," says:

The tradition of the Jews has it that Christ will come at midnight, just as at the time of the going forth from Egypt when the Passover was celebrated and the destroying angel came: when the Lord passed over our houses and our doorposts were consecrated by the blood of the Lamb. Whence also I think that the apostolic tradition has survived of not allowing the people awaiting the coming of Christ to be dismissed before midnight on the vigil of Easter. But after that hour has passed, all, with confidence of safety, celebrate the vigil.¹⁴

Isidore, years later, assigns the same reasons for the Easter vigil. He writes:

We spend this night in vigil because of the advent of our King and God, that He may not find us sleeping at the time of His resurrection but keeping watch. The night contains a

14. Com. in Matt. IV, 25. P.L. XXVI, 184-185.

twofold mystery because during it He received life again although He had died, and because at this very same hour at which He arose He will come for judgment.¹⁵

And two centuries later the same belief is countenanced by a Poitiers Pontifical:

With great care be contrived that "Glory to God" be not begun that night before one star can be seen in the sky, to the end that the people may not be dismissed from the church before midnight. For indeed it is an apostolic tradition that at midnight on this most sacred night the Lord will come to judgment. . . . And as it is reported on the testimony of truthful persons who in our time have come from Jerusalem, the faithful there, being instructed in this authoritative tradition, assemble in the church for the vigil on Easter eve as if ready to receive the Lord and to hasten unto His judgment, and with minds full of eager devotion await the hour named in the gospels in silence and fear. The clergy also with their pontiff abiding in the church that night, with fear and devotion, await the hour.¹⁶

Christ arose from the grave on Sunday. In a short time every Sunday became a commemoration of the Lord's Resurrection. Every Sunday became a "little Easter."¹⁷ Consequently, every Sunday had to be prepared for by a vigil. Who knew but that the Lord would choose one of

15. Isidore, Etymologiarum (Originum) VI, 17, 12. P.L. LXXXII, 248. Cf. also, Lactantius, Divin. Instit. VII, 19.

16. Arsenal of Paris, MS. no. 227, Fol. 178. Cf. Batifol, op. cit., p. 2, note 1.

17. Cf. Calliewaert, Liturgicae Institutiones (Brugis: Carolus Beyaert, 1939), Tractatus 2us, De Breviarii Romani Liturgia, p. 39. Cf. also Batifol, op. cit., pp. 1-3.

these "little Easters" for His return? Thus, in time the Paschal vigil gave birth to fifty-one other vigils, one for every Sunday in the year. We must note in passing, however, that it was physically impossible to celebrate these weekly vigils with the same solemnity as the Easter vigil, and so the Christians did not begin the Sunday vigil until early Sunday morning.¹⁸ This point will be of considerable importance later in our study.

As the years went on and Christ did not return, many of the Christians died. Some were martyred for the faith. The Christians seeing the analogy between Christ's Passion and Easter victory and the passion and victory of the martyrs, concluded that the martyrs' feastdays should be celebrated with a vigil similar to that of Easter. Already in the year 155 these martyr vigils were a common practice. The letter of the faithful at Smyrna announcing the martyrdom of their bishop, St. Polycarp, mentions that the natale of a martyr is celebrated by a vigil at the place where his body reposes. The letter indicates that the custom is already sanctioned by long tradition.¹⁹

These vigils of Easter, of Sundays, and of the martyrs suffered many ramifications during the course of

18. The opinion is that of Batifol, Ibid. Callewaert (Ibid.) says that even the Sunday vigils were in the beginning all night vigils (pannuchis).

19. Cf. Batifol, op. cit., p. 9.

history but eventually became stabilized in the form of that hour we now term Matins.

If we remember that the progenitor of Matins is the idea of our Lord's speedy return as judge, the purpose and symbolism of Matins becomes clear. Every midnight hour is the symbol of the midnight hour when Christ will return as king, and prayer is said at the midnight hour to enable the faithful soul to be watchful and to purify himself from sin lest the arrival of his Lord should find him unprepared. These are the thoughts which fill the Matin hymns. Again and again we pray in them that darkness and sleep, the symbols of sin and of the power of the devil, may be repelled far from us so that we may be ready for Christ's advent, and pass our time until that advent singing His glory in joyous expectation.

To pray Matins correctly we must try to get the same ideas about the parousia as the early Christians had. We might be a bit surprised and even disappointed to note in the Matin hymns a seeming preoccupation with sin and personal misery. However it is a great mistake to see the hymns in this light or to think that meditation on the parousia meant for the early Christians a meditation on their own sins and wretchedness. The Middle Ages might have been inspired to pray Dies Irae (Days of Wrath) when

meditating on the parousia, but not so the early Christians. Rather, I think their attitude towards His Second Coming is eloquently summed up by the last words of Holy Writ. St. John quotes Christ as saying, "I come quickly." And immediately the prayerful and joyful cry is wrenched from him, "So be it! Come, Lord Jesus."

We must remember that with the ridicule and persecution to death which faith brought with it, the convert of the early ages was forced to make a complete break with the world in order to embrace Christ. The world of paganism and of Judaism would have no more of him except to abuse him. Such being the case, do we wonder that the Christian looked forward with great joy to the Second Coming of his King? He was only looking forward to liberation, to the day of his glory with Christ. True, he was conscious of his own sins, of his own unworthiness, but he did not dwell upon his own misery. The object of his meditation was Christ and His strength, not himself and his weakness. And his meditation on the parousia was a joyful meditation.

How then explain these Matin hymns? We can understand them only if we recall that Matins as we know it was not for the early Church a complete office. It was only a

portion of the vigilia and was intended to give only a partial picture of Christ's coming. This partial picture is that of the human weaknesses which must be overcome to be ready to meet the Bridgroom.

LAUDS

The remaining portion of the vigilia gives us the glorious side of the picture. Let us return to the vigil of Holy Saturday night. After midnight on that eve the celebration of the Easter liturgy began, and although during their vigil the people may have reflected on their sinfulness, now there was no more place for such thoughts. Christ had risen! Darkness must give way to Light! Defeat is swallowed up in victory! Sin is destroyed by grace! Weakness is overcome by strength! The note of the nocturnal celebration becomes that of exultant jubilation with Christ.

We have already noted that the vigils of the "little Easters" and of the martyrs' feast days were not all night vigils but rather began early in the morning. At these vigils, therefore, the Easter celebration began not at midnight but at cockcrow with the rising of the sun. Thus the return of the material light flooding creation with fresh life and strength became in the minds of the Christians the daily symbol and reminder of the Resurrection

and victory of Him who is the life and light of the world. At the cockcrow of dawn, then, their prayers would always take on the jubilant notes of Easter.

From this latter part of the vigils said at dawn developed our office of Lauds.

The dawn brings back light, hope, and joy to the world. . . .and the office of Lauds belongs to dawn; the rising sun is greeted in the psalms and hymns said at that hour. The day star rising in the east and driving away the darkness is the symbol of Christ who rose from the tomb in the early dawn and dispelled the darkness of death.²⁰

Lauds is, therefore, the office of Christ's Resurrection. It is a daily celebration of that Solemnity of solemnities.²¹ It is the complement of Matins, and these two hours, the one a longing prayer of sinful man for the advent of Christ with His redeeming graces, the other the commemoration of Christ's victory over sin, the Resurrection, His pledge to us of eternal glory at His Second Advent, must not be studied apart from one another. Matins can never be understood unless seen in the light of a glorious parousia of which Lauds, i.e., the Resurrection, is the pledge.

20. Cabrol, Liturgical Prayer (New York: Kenedy & Sons, 1922), pp. 138, 144.

As in the other hours so in Lauds the hymns epitomize the central thoughts of the hour. These Lauds' hymns are replete with references to the returning light of dawn as the symbol of Christ's Resurrection.

21. "We must pray in the morning that the Lord's Resurrection may be celebrated by morning prayer." St. Cyprian, De oratione, 35 (Ante Nicen Fathers, V, 457).

We must as far as possible eliminate in our own minds the distinction between Matins and Lauds. No such distinction existed for the early Christians. In the dark of night they come together to watch and pray. They must be vigilant as the five wise virgins so as to be ready to welcome the Bridegroom should He come tonight. Earnestly, expectantly, joyfully they pray, "Come, O Lord Jesus. Come, come. Come to your people as triumphant King. We have sinned. Satan has some power over us, yes. But do you come and destroy our sin and his power. Come, come."

In the early morning light, nature's sacramental sign of Christ's eternal victory, they see the answer to their prayer. The parousia is not yet. But they need not fear for God has sent a pledge of the glories to come in this sign of His Son's victory. And so with great joy they enter into the Easter celebration knowing that soon, very soon, their nocturnal vigil will end in the delights of the eternal Easter.

Thus, Matins and Lauds was for these early Christians, as, indeed, it must be for us also, but one picture, but one prayer.

A word yet about the names Matins and Lauds. In his rule St. Benedict speaks not of Matins and Lauds but of vigils and Matins. The word Lauds he uses to designate

the last three Laudate psalms of his Matins. The word Matins was originally applied to our Lauds because Matins means aurora, dawn, and it was always at dawn or cockcrow (gallicinium) that Matins was said. The preceding office belonged to the night and so was called Vigils, (vigilare-to be awake, watching). In later ages when the offices were said later and later in the day, the Vigil office did not itself start until dawn and so came to be called Matins, the prayer of dawn. The office originally designated by that name was then called Lauds after the last three psalms of that office.

VESPERS

We have seen that from the synaxis (vigilia) of the early Christians the canonical hours of Matins and Lauds developed. Yet another hour, that of Vespers, has its origin in this vigilia. In fact, this evening hour takes its very name from the fact that the vigilia began when the evening star, vesper, appeared in the sky. Vesperum autem nominatum a sidere, qui vesper vocatur, et decedente sole exoritur.²²

Because of the physical difficulties involved, the weekly all night vigil was soon abandoned, as noted above,

²². Isidore, De Eccle. Officiis, I, 20; P.L. LXXXIII, 758.

and replaced by a shorter vigil beginning early in the morning before dawn at first cockerow.²³ However, the Christians, unwilling to drop their evening assemblies entirely, even though they did not intend to spend the entire night together in prayer, nevertheless met as before on the evening of vigil days for a short service. Thus, by Tertullian's time (b. 160) three different synaxes prevailed. First, there was the vigilia plena, all night vigil, still observed on Easter and on other big feastdays.²⁴ Secondly, there were the coetus antelucani, the assemblies before light.²⁵ Lastly, there was

23. Cabrol, op.cit., p. 143. For the time of the various cockcrows see Dict. de la Bible, vol. II, part 1, 953. For an explanation of the cock as the symbol of our Resurrection and that of Christ, see D.A.C.L., vol. III, part 2, 2886-2887.

24. Exhorting Christian women not to unite in matrimony with pagans Tertullians says, "Who (what pagan husband) will without anxiety endure her absence all the night long at the paschal solemnities?" Ad Uxor., II, 5. (Ante Nicene Fathers, III, p. 94).

25. "We take at the congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist." Thus, in Tertullian's time it was the custom to conclude this latter part of the all night vigil with the Holy Sacrifice. In the fourth century the Mass was separated from these morning vigils.

De Corona, cap. 3. (Ante Nicene Fathers, III, p. 94).

the coetus vespertinus, the evening gathering from which comes our present office of Vespers.²⁶

If we wish to understand the importance of Vespers, its origin, the ideas inspiring it, we can do nothing better than to study this evening assembly of the first centuries. The rite of this ceremony has three distinct parts: (1) the lucernarium, lighting of lamps, (2) the convivium caritativum, the banquet of love, and (3) the euchologium.²⁷ We will consider briefly each of these parts.

First, the lucernarium, or the rite of lighting and blessing the lamps to be used in the evening. In certain pagan religions of the east (the Brahman and the Parsi), light was itself the object of worship. In almost all ancient cults light played an important role, even if not directly worshipped.²⁸ That we should find lights and fire, the seven branched candlestick, and the perpetual fire on the altar of holocausts in the Jewish rite is not surprising, therefore; nor is it surprising that

26. Cf. Callewaert, op. cit., p. 41.

27. For a description of these three parts of the early vesper service see Tertullian's Apologia, c. 39 (Ante Nicene Fathers, III, 47).

28. Cf. Ryan, Candles in the Roman Rite, (A. Gross Inc. 1937), pp. 1-8.

lights should be used in the Christian ritual, for the apostles and early disciples of Christ had at first no intention of cutting themselves off from the synagogue. Rather, the Acts of the Apostles makes it clear that they "continued daily with one accord in the temple."²⁹ The early Christians were Jews, steeped in the traditions of Judaism, with no intention of giving up Judaism because of their acceptance of Christ. Thus it came about that the whole liturgical life of Christianity is built on the framework of the Jewish religious life.

From the scanty evidence which we have it seems fairly certain that the Jews were accustomed to light lamps with some religious rite daily at the vesper hour.³⁰ Tertullian explains that at their evening assembly the Jewish Christians kept this Jewish rite of the lighting of lamps.³¹ They did, of course, give it a Christian interpretation. The lucernarium of the Jews became for them not so much a thanksgiving service for natural light

29. Acts 2:46.

30. And they offer holocausts to the Lord every day, morning and evening, and incense made according to the ordinance of the law, and the loaves are set forth on a most clean table, and there is with us the golden candlestick, and the lamps thereof, to be lighted always in the evening; for we keep the precepts of the Lord, our God. (II Par. 13:11)

Cf. Callewaert, op.cit., p. 192, note 4, for references among the Fathers.

31. Tertullian, Ad Nationes, I, 13 (Ante Nicene Fathers, III, 123).

as a thanksgiving for and adoration of Christ, the light of the world, whom the Father had sent to mankind at the vesper hour.

When this world's night began to fall,
As goes a bridegroom from his hall,
Thou camest from Thy palace-room,
The Virgin Mother's stainless womb.³²

St. Hippolytus (c. 220) tells us that at Rome the lucernarium was celebrated by bringing a burning light into the midst of the congregation and then singing a prayer of thanks for the natural light of day and for the incorruptible light which Christ revealed.³³

St. Cyprian (c. 220) explains the lucernarium thus:

At the sunsetting and decline of day, of necessity we must pray. For since Christ is the true sun and the true day, as the worldly sun and worldly day depart when we pray and ask that light may return to us again, we pray for the advent of Christ (symbolized by the burning torches brought into our midst), which shall give us the grace of everlasting light.³⁴

32. Vesper hymn for Advent (Monastic Breviary). In his tract De Spiritu Sancto St. Basil says that the following hymn was sung at the lucernarium of his day (ad lucernas):

O Blessed Jesus Christ, joyful light of the holy glory of the immortal Father, the Heavenly, the Holy!--now being come unto the setting of the sun and beholding the light of evening, we bless the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit of God.
Worthy art thou at all times to be praised with holy voices, O Son of God that givest life.
Therefore doth all the world glorify Thee.

Cf. P.G. XXXII, 206 (Eng. trans: Batifol, op.cit., pp.6-7).

33. Cf. Callewaert, op. cit., p. 42.

34. Cyprian, De oratione, 35 (Ante Nicene Fathers V, 457). The parentheses are mine.

Eventually the beautiful service of the lucernarium was dropped, how or why no one seems to know. That it was almost if not completely forgotten in the West by the sixth century is evident from the Rule of St. Benedict. Vespers for St. Benedict is no longer the beginning of the night office celebrated at the appearance of the vesper (evening star). Rather, he prescribes that Vespers is always to terminate before nightfall, hence making the lucernarium unnecessary. Even during Lent when the only meal of the day is to be taken after Vespers have been sung, everything is to be so arranged that all can be done by daylight.³⁵

The second part of the ancient evening synaxis was the convivium caritativum, or as we are more used to calling the agape, love banquet. Again this ceremony is the fruit of Christian interpretation of Jewish ideas. In the Jewish liturgy the vesper hour was very important. It was the first hour of the new day and the hour of the "evening sacrifice" of a lamb and incense offered daily in the temple. Thus, the vesper hour was for the Jews an hour consecrated to prayer. The pious Jew would be found in the Temple at vespers joining in the evening sacrifice, or, if this was not possible, at least devoting himself to private

35. Cf. Regula, cap. XLI.

prayer and joining in spirit with the Temple sacrifice.

"Let my prayer be set forth in your sight as the incense, and let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice."³⁶

Cassian tells us that the Christians understood the evening sacrifice as the sacrifice of the new law,³⁷ and St. Isidore explains:

The vesper hour was solemnly celebrated in the Old Testament. It was the custom under the old law to offer sacrifice and incense at this time. . . . So also in the New Testament it behooves us to present ourselves to God, to hymn His glory, to offer the sacrifice of our prayers, and to exult together in His praise at that hour when our Lord and Savior gave to His apostles the Mystery of His body and blood so that He might show that the vesper hour is the hour of sacrifice.³⁸

It was fitting, therefore, that at Vespers of the Christian day a Sacrifice of praise be offered in memory of and in thanksgiving for the eternal sacrifice given to the world at vespers of the first Holy Thursday and

36. Psalm 140.

37. "Let my prayer be set forth in your sight as the incense, and let the lifting up of my hands be an evening sacrifice;" in which place we can understand it in a still higher sense of that true evening sacrifice which was given by the Lord our Savior in the evening to the apostles at the Supper, when He instituted the holy mysteries of the Church, and of that evening sacrifice which He Himself, on the following day, offered up to the Father by the lifting up of His hands for the salvation of the whole world. (Institutes, III, 3. Eng. trans. Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, XL, p. 214).

38. De Eccle. Officiis. P.L. LXXXIII, 758.

offered to the Father for the salvation of the world at vespers of the first Good Friday. Hence was introduced the agape, an evening meal taken in common by all the Christians of a community. The meal was meant to be a re-enactment of the Last Supper at which Christ prayed that through His coming sacrifice all His disciples might be one in love. That was the one and only effect Christ had hoped to obtain through His evening sacrifice, the unity of all His followers through the bonds of love. The Christians realized that there could be no better evening sacrifice offered in thanksgiving for the Eucharist than this very love for which Christ gave His life. Their agape, or love feast, was meant to be, therefore, the external symbol of this intense fraternal love which the Christian community was offering as its evening sacrifice. By their love feast the Christians "exulted together in His praise at that hour when our Lord and Savior gave to His apostles the mystery of His body and blood."

In the course of time the agape, like the lucernarium, fell by the wayside. Already in St. Paul's time abuses had crept in so that he was obliged to reprimand the Corinthians for their gluttony and drunkenness at the agape. St. Augustine mentions the same abuses. By the fourth century the agape was on the way out. By the fifth it was

a thing of the past.³⁹

Of the three parts of the original Vespers only the third, the euchology, the chanting of hymns and psalms, has come down to us. However, this euchology must not be considered as a part distinct in itself but rather as a subdivision or adornment of the lucernarium and agape. Just as the Jews sang psalms at their lucernarium so did the Christians, and just as Christ and His apostles sang hymns and psalms at the Last Supper so also did the Christians sing psalms and hymns at their agape.

By considering the euchology of our modern Vespers in this light we can still today breathe into it the spirit of the ancient lucernarium and agape. Thus, the lucernarium was certainly meant to be a daily celebration of Christmas, of the Incarnation. Christ, the brilliance of the Father, the light of the world, rising up for the nations hitherto sitting in darkness, is surely the central thought of both Christmas and of the lucernarium. And although we no longer have the lucernarium, we daily sing in our Vespers Mary's own hymn of thanks to God for the Incarnation of Christ who has just taken up His abode in her womb. Certainly it is not difficult to see in Mary's Magnificat a daily celebration of the entrance of

³⁹. Cf. Callewaert, op. cit., p. 193.

Light into a darksome world, a vestige, therefore, in our Office, of the lucernarium.

Again, the agape was meant to be a love feast, a gathering of a community of brethren deeply in love with one another and with God for the purpose of giving external expression to that love, of increasing that love, and of offering it to God in thanksgiving for His sacrament and sacrifice of love. Any hour of the Divine Office could be considered as a similar gathering, but perhaps Vespers has the special right to be so considered because of the agape which formerly was an integral part of Vespers and because of the ease with which so many of the psalms at Vespers can be accomodated to the Cucharistic setting.

This nocturnal group of hours comprising Matins, Lauds, and Vespers, is far older than its two brother groups. The vigils from which these hours sprung date from the very beginning of the Church. The apostles themselves must have taken part in such vigils. Perhaps such a nocturnal vigil is described in the second chapter of Acts: "All who believed . . . breaking bread in their houses took their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God."⁴⁰ Surely the assembly mentioned

40. Acts 2:44-47.

in the twentieth chapter of Acts can be nothing but such such a vigil. "And on the first day of the week, when we had met for the breaking of bread, Paul addressed them . . . and prolonged his address until midnight."⁴¹ Some commentators believe that Paul was legislating for such assemblies of prayer when he instructed Timothy that when people meet for prayer they are to offer "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving. . . for all men; for kings, for all in high stations."⁴² So it is certain that the all night vigils originated with the apostles.

Exactly when this all night vigils split into the morning and evening synaxes is not so certain. We have already seen that they were known in Tertullian's time towards the close of the second century. But there is good reason to believe that these assemblies are much older and date from the close of the apostolic age, i.e., from the first years of the second century. Our authority for this is Pliny the younger, governor of Bithynia at the opening of the second century.

In a report drawn up for his master, Trajan, the governor speaks of the assemblies of the Christians. He has nothing to reproach them with. All he knows about them is that they are wont to meet very early,

41. Ibid. 20:7.

42. I Tim. 2:1; cf. Hom. and Past. XXV, pp. 151ff.

ere the break of day: Ante lucem convenire (solent),
hymnumque Christo quasi Deo canere. Then they re-
tire for a time to return once more at night for
a common meal, the agape.⁴³

THE DIURNAL GROUP

GENESIS

Our study of the nocturnal hours has brought us to a knowledge of the public and official prayer of the Church as it was at the beginning of the fourth century. We have seen that the Church in an attempt to prepare herself for Christ's Second Coming by giving heed to the admonition, Oportet semper orare et non deficere,⁴⁴ began the observance of the Sunday vigil from which grew the offices of Sunday Matins, Lauds, and Vespers. At the beginning of the fourth century these three weekly offices together with the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the observance of the feasts of certain martyrs comprised the sum total of the Church's public prayer.

We now turn our attention to the diurnal group of hours and we hope to discover (1) how the offices of Tierce, Sext, and None originated, and (2) how the offices of Matins, Lauds, and Vespers came to be celebrated daily.

In the fifty years subsequent to the declaration of the Peace of the Church by Constantine (313) three things

43. Ibid.

44. Luke 18:1.

happened which exerted a tremendous influence on the formation of the public prayer of the Church. First of all, magnificent basilicas were erected. Now for the first time Christians were permitted to practice their faith in public, and they were quite naturally eager to raise buildings worthy to shelter their mysteries. Secondly, with the peace came a great influx of converts. The Church experienced a great numerical increase after 313, but with numbers came problems and so at that time she also experienced a cooling of the original fervor among the masses. However, this decrease of fervor among the Christians had its reaction on that small group always present in the Church, the electi, striving for perfection. These for the first time in the history of the Church (and this is the third point of importance) began to band together and to live the common life.

This last of the three points is by far the most important. Tierce, Sex, None, and the daily recitation of the nocturnal hours, all originated with these early attempts at cenobitic life. The churches are important only in so far as their beauty encouraged these pious souls to inaugurate such daily public praise of God. The decrease of fervor among the masses had only a negative value, that of giving to the ascetics an example to be

avoided and of spurning them on to make up for the general lack.

When we say that Tierce, Sext, and None originated with the cenobitic life, we refer to public recitation of prayers at these hours and not to private prayer. Already among the Jews the third, sixth, and ninth hours seem to have been times of private prayer.⁴⁵ In the Acts we are told that it was the third hour when the apostles with the first Christians were fathered in prayer before the descent of the Holy Ghost;⁴⁶ again that Peter laid aside other activities to engage in prayer at the sixth hour;⁴⁷ and, finally, that Cornelius, the centurion, was observing the ninth hour of prayer when he was granted the vision which led to his baptism.⁴⁸

We have almost innumerable witnesses from the first two hundred years of the Church to prove that the early Christians observed these three times of daily private prayer.⁴⁹ Tertullian speaks of prayer at these times

45. Cf. Callewaert, op. cit., p. 188.

46. Acts 2:15.

47. Idem 10:19.

48. Idem 10:1, 30.

49. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, Stromata (P.G. IX, 324, 455-58, 504); Athanasius, De virginitate (P.G. XXVIII, 265, 272, 276); Constitutiones apostolicae (P.G. I, 1075, 88).

Concerning these times of prayer Cyprian says:

And in discharging the duties of prayer, we find that the three children with Daniel, being strong in faith and victorious in captivity,

together with the prayers of morning and evening as a duty of Christian life which no one is at liberty to neglect. His exact words read:

Touching the time, however, the extrinsic observance of certain hours will not be unprofitable, those common hours, I mean, which mark the intervals of the day--the third, the sixth, the ninth--which we may find in the Scriptures to have been more solemn than the rest. . . .Albeit these practices (of private prayer at such times) stand simply without any precept for their observance, still it may be granted a good thing to establish some definite presumption, which may both add stringency to the admonition to pray, and may, as it were by a law, tear us out from our businesses unto such a duty; so that. . .we pray at least not less than thrice in the day . . . in addition to our regular prayers which are due, without any admonition, on the entrance of light and of night.⁵⁰

The ordinary Christian of the first two centuries was, therefore, obliged by custom not only to attend Matins,

observed the third, sixth, and ninth hour, as it were, for a sacrament of the Trinity, which in the last times had to be manifested. For both the first hour in its progress to the third shows forth the consummated number of the Trinity, and also the fourth proceeding to the sixth declares another Trinity; and when from the seventh the ninth is completed, the perfect Trinity is numbered every three hours, which spaces of hours, the worshippers of God in time past having spiritually decided upon, made use of for determined and lawful times for prayer. And subsequently the thing was manifested, that these things were of old Sacraments, in that anciently righteous men prayed in this manner. For upon the disciples at the third hour the Holy Spirit descended, who fulfilled the grace of the Lord's promise. Moreover, at the sixth hour, Peter, going up unto the house-top, was instructed as well by the sign as by the word of God admonishing him to receive all to the

Lauds, and Vespers on the vigil days but also to daily private prayer in the morning, evening, at the third, sixth, and ninth hours. But with the spread of Christianity after 313 and the resultant torpor in devotion this custom was not observed. Magnificent churches had been built but the average Catholic did not seem eager to fill them with the voice of his praise. Even the Sunday Eucharistic Banquet began to be neglected.⁵¹

Such torpor gave birth to the ascetics. These electi would not allow the grand and holy aisles of the house of the Lord to stand silent and prayerless for hours and days together. In their fervor they went beyond the demands of the customs of their day. Thus, they came to church for Sunday vigils just as the other pious Christians did, but over and above this they began to observe among themselves and in common daily vigils, i.e., daily recitation of

grace of salvation, whereas he was previously doubtful of the receiving of the Gentiles to baptism. And from the sixth hour to the ninth, the Lord, being crucified, washed away our sins by His blood: and that He might redeem and quicken us, He then accomplished His victory by His passion. (De oratione, XXXIV; Eng. trans.: Ante Nicene Fathers, V, 456-457).

50. Tertullian, De oratione (Eng. trans. 689-90).

51. Homilia de Bapt. Christi et de Epiph (P.G. XLIX, 363). Chrysostom complains that on the day of great joy (Epiphany) he alone is sad; (ego vero in moerore sum solus....crucior et animi dolori angor). Such sadness is brought on, he explains, because the children of the Church no longer attend her assemblies.

Vespers, Matins, and Lauds, as well as daily common and public prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours.⁵² St. John Chrysostom derived immense joy from contemplation of these bodies of ascetics. In praising those of Antioch he states that six times daily they come together to sing psalms, at cockcrow, at dawn, at the third hours, the sixth, the ninth, and at eventide.⁵³

Thus it is that from the ancient practice of private prayers at Tierce, Sext, and None, and in the evening and in the morning, came eventually the establishment of public prayer in common at these times.

These new hours of public prayer originated in the East. When they spread to the West, Tierce, Sext, and None as well as daily Matins remained the exclusive office of the ascetics, but daily public recitation in church of Vespers and of Lauds along with Matins on Sunday was imposed as a strict obligation on the clergy. Attendance by the faithful at these hours was encouraged, not demanded. If the clergy of a certain locality were attached to a church with which a body of ascetics was associated, then the clergy and ascetics prayed daily Vespers, Lauds, and Sunday Matins together. Daily Matins,

52. Cf. Callewaert, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

53. Hom. 14 in I Tim. (P.G.LXII, 575-57). For numerous other references to the ascetics see Callewaert, p. 43, note 3, and Batifol, p. 13, note 4.

Tierce, Sext, and None were prayed by the ascetics alone, and if no ascetics belonged to a certain church then these offices were not recited there.

Tierce, Sext, and None formed no part of the office of the clergy. Indeed, a sharp distinction was made in the fourth, fifth, and even in the sixth century between the ordo psallendi (office) of the clergy, which comprised only the nocturnal offices, and the ordo psallendi (office) of the ascetics, which included also the diurnal hours. At times it seems that the diocesan superiors even held these monastic hours in disdain. Thus a decree coming from the council of Braga (Gaul) in 561 reads:

We ordain that there shall be but one and the same ordo psallendi for the evening and the morning offices; and we reject the monastic uses which are being introduced side by side with those which according to rule obtain in our churches.⁵⁴

Sometimes, at least in one instance in the East, these two liturgies of the Divine Office existed side by side in the same church. If the body of faithful of this church were pious and loyal in their attendance at the daily offices, then we find the ideal performance of the liturgy of the fourth century. Such conditions, so far as we know,

54. Mansi, IX, 777. The case of a body of ascetics attached to a particular church in the West is hypothetical given only for the sake of example.

existed in only one church, that of the Anastasis (Resurrection) in Jerusalem. To review and exemplify by concrete illustrations and thus to fix firmly in mind what we have learned thus far I would like to quote an account of the daily liturgy of the Anastasis as described by a pilgrim visiting that church in the fourth century.

Every night, before cockcrow, the doors of the Anastasis are opened, and the monazontes (monks) and parthenae (virgins) come in; and besides these lay folks, men and women, who desire to keep the vigil. From that time to sunrise they sing psalms and at the end of each psalm they recite a prayer. These are said by priests and deacons who are appointed for each day to the number of two or three to come to conduct the office of the monazontes.⁵⁴ But at the moment when the day dawns they begin singing the morning psalms (matutinos ymnos). Then the bishop arrives with his clergy, and standing within the balustrade he says the prayers pro omnibus, pro catechumenis, pro fidelibus.⁵⁵ He then retires, after everyone has gone up to kiss his hand and receive his benediction. It being now daylight, the congregation is dismissed.

At the sixth hour the monazontes and the parthenae again assemble in the basilica of the Anastasis and sing psalms. This being duly signified to the bishop, he comes and without sitting down but remaining standing within the balustrade he recites the prayers as in the morning. He then retires, after everyone has gone up to kiss his hand. At the ninth hour the same office is performed as at the sixth.⁵⁷

⁵⁵. Notice that only two or three of the clergy are present to supervise.

⁵⁶. At the beginning of Lauds the clergy comes:
' Incipit ordo psallendi clericorum.

⁵⁷. Notice that none of the clergy are present with the exception of the bishop who only comes at the completion of the hours to give his blessing.

Again at the tenth hour, the hour which they call here "licinicon" and which we call "lucernare," the people crowd into the Anastasis. All the candles are lit and the illumination is most bright. Then they chant the evening psalms (psalmi lucernares), together with long antiphons.⁵⁸ Then word is sent to the bishop who comes down and sits on his throne with his priests in their places around him.⁵⁹ When the chanting of psalms and antiphons is finished the bishop rises . . . and recites a prayer. It is a prayer for all the congregation; both the faithful and the catechumens have part in it. . . So end the office; everyone departs after having kissed the bishop's hand.⁶⁰

So fervent were the people of the Anastasis that for the Sunday vigil they came in throngs as numerous as those for Easter. Fearing to arrive late they came to their church long before the first cockcrow and recited psalms until the doors were opened at the beginning of the vigil.⁶¹ Unfortunately these happy conditions were too ideal to be duplicated in any other church in the world.

PURPOSE AND SYMBOLISM

This diurnal group of hours has very definite purposes considered either as a unified group or as distinct units.

58. This is the lucernarium and not Vespers properly so called.

59. The clergy come at the beginning of the euchology, Vespers.

60. *Peregrinatio ad Loca Sancta* (Rome edition, 1887), pp. 76-8. According to Callewaert Tierce was celebrated in the Anastasis only during the Easter season.

61. Ibid.

The names of these offices, Prime, Terce, Sext, and None, take us back in mind to the division of time in use with the Romans and the ancients in general. The day as well as the night was divided into twelve "hours." "Nonne duodecim sunt horae diei? (Are there not twelve hours to the day?)" our Lord said to His apostles.⁶² These twelves "hours" included the whole duration of daylight, from dawn to dusk. They were, consequently, of varying length during the summer and winter months. Again these twelve "hours" were grouped under four sections of three hours each, and each section, or division was called by the name of the hour at which it began; thus, from six until nine in the morning was prima hora (first hour); from nine until noon was hora tertia (third hour), etc.⁶³

The general purpose, therefore, of private prayer at the third, sixth, and ninth hours and of the later public prayers at these times was to sanctify and consecrate the whole day by sanctifying and consecrating each major section of the day. As to the meaning or symbolism of these hours we have no way of knowing what symbolism, if any, the first Christians gave to Tierce, Sext, and None. Perhaps they made no attempt at first to associate these different hours with the various mysteries of Christianity.

TIERCE

By Tertullian's time, however, such an association or symbolism had arisen. We pray at Tierce, he says, because "the first infusion of the Holy Spirit into the

⁶². John 11:9.

⁶³. Hom. & Past. XXV, p. 838.

congregated disciples took place at the third hour."⁶⁴ Thus, Tierce became in the Christian's mind the daily repeated symbol and celebration of that third hour on Pentecost morning when the Holy Ghost descended upon the praying disciples. As Vespers is the daily celebration of the Incarnation, and Lauds of the Resurrection, so is Tierce the daily celebration of Pentecost.

If we would properly pray Tierce, therefore, we must daily at the third hour unite ourselves with the apostles in the upper room. With them we must pray for His guiding, sanctifying presence. As St. Basil in his Rule exhorts:

Let the brethren come together for prayer at the third hour, in order that, being mindful of the gifts of the Holy Ghost which were granted to the apostles at about that time, they may all pay homage to Him with one mind, and ask of Him that they may likewise be found worthy to receive His sanctifying presence, beseeching Him, moreover, that He may guide them in the true doctrine and in the right way, thus imitating him who said, "Cor mundum crea in me Deus . . . ne projicias me a facie tua; et Spiritum Sanctum tuum ne auferas a me."⁶⁵ After that let them return to the work which has been momentarily interrupted.⁶⁶

In her final formation of Tierce the Church has adopted this association of the daily third hour with that first third hour of Pentecost. Knowing what need we have of

64. Tertullian, De oratione, 25 (Ante Nicene Fathers, III, 690). Cf. also Tertullian, De jejuniis, 10 (Ante Nicene Fathers, IV, 108-09).

65. Psalm 50.

66. Basil, Regula, Interrogatio 37 (P.G. XXXI, 1014).

the ever abiding presence of the Spirit of holiness she teach us to pray daily:

Come, Holy Ghost, who ever One
Art with the Father and the Son,
It is the hour, our souls possess
With Thy full flood of holiness.

Without the Holy Spirit St. Paul tells us that no one can even pronounce the name of Jesus reverently. Mother Church teaches us to beg at Tierce that through the power of this Spirit not only our tongue but our whole being, mouth, tongue, intellect, emotions, may resound with divine praise:

Let flesh and heart and lips and mind
Sound forth our witness to mankind.

And, finally, she puts words in our mouths by which we ask Him who is the very Love of God to give us a charity bursting forth in such roaring flames that its heat may touch and warm everyone with whom we shall have contact this day:

Let love light up our mortal frame,
Till others catch the living flame.

SEXT

The symbolism of Tierce is very easy to perceive; that of Sext is very difficult. Its historical origin attaches no particular symbolism to it, and although all are agreed that Sext in some way should commemorate the agony on the cross which began at the sixth hour, nevertheless a

universally accepted symbolism has never been assigned to it as there has been to Tierce and None.

The Fathers give us some aid. St. Basil in his rule tells us that Sext is the struggle against the noonday devil.⁶⁷ Medieval and later commentators who attempt to fix the signification of this hour are, however, of no assistance. For instance, a French cardinal of the seventeenth century, Cardinal Bona, says that we pray at Sext, the middle of the day, because,

Christ, our Savior, was always delighted by the middle. For, that He might work our salvation in the midst of the earth, He was born at the middle of the night, in the midst of two animals, and while still a boy disputed in the midst of the doctors, etc.⁶⁸

Such reflections attract us only by their oddity, not by their usefulness.

But let us not be discouraged into apathy by this lack of assigned symbolism for Sext. In matters dogmatic the Church encourages us to study and to draw conclusion especially on those precise points which have not been made clear by tradition or definition. In this matter also I

⁶⁷. P.G. XXXI, 1013.

⁶⁸. Christus Salvator semper medio est oblectatus! Nam ut salutem operaretur in medio terrae, media nocte natus est, in medio duorum animalium, et adhuc puer in medio doctorum disputavit, etc. (Hom. and Past. XXV, p. 1059).

think she would tell us not to despair of finding the meaning of Sext but to enter into an even deeper study of Sext than of the other hours. The hour certainly has some distinctive symbolism and purpose and it is for us to discover them. So, let us launch into the deep and with the help of God's grace and of one or the other of the Fathers perhaps we shall discover a satisfactory explanation of Sext.

We have noticed in our study of the other hours that the hymns usually reveal the central thought of their respective hours. Perhaps, then, the best place to begin our consideration of Sext is with its hymn:

O potent Ruler, truthful God,
Who rulest all with tempering rod,
Flooding the morn with splendors bright,
Kindling the noon with fires of light:

Quench Thou the flames of every strife,
And cool the heart with passion rife:
And to the body health impart,
And peace surpassing to the heart.

Now let us examine closely some of the phrases of the hymn.

"Flames of strife . . . heart with passion rife." The words come as a surprise to us, even, perhaps, give us a little jolt. What has happened to the fire of charity burning so brightly at Tierce? But we must face the fact that only too often in the history of the Church the flame of charity has been extinguished. Frequently within the

fold itself the passions have been given free reign. Dates and personages need not be cited. The periods of darkness when wickedness has been exalted to high places within the Church are well known to us all. At such a time there can be no love. There is only hate, hate of God, hate of neighbor. Another fire is enkindled, the "flames of strife." It rages over the face of the earth and scorches the ground upon which the seed of divine life has fallen. And then the beautiful bride of Christ, without spot or stain, herself becomes sordid and in need of diving cleansing.

Now note the position of Sext among the canonical hours. It is sandwiched between Tierce and None. At Tierce we celebrate the growth of the Church at Pentecost, the beginning of her earthly history. At None we will find her in thought near the end of her earthly history within the sight of eternity. Sext coming between these two hours at the middle of the day is surely meant to be a symbol of all the intervening history; more specifically, it is meant to be a sign of the turbulent times of the Church's history. Ever conscious of the poetry of nature, the Church seeing the physical strength of man sapped under the burning noonday sun is reminded at Sext of those ever present spiritual weaknesses so evident in her history which lead to such calamities as those of the tenth century, and prays that such infirmities may be overcome.

"Potent Ruler." The times are troublesome but Mother Church, rather than meditating on her own misery, lifts her eyes to her all powerful Ruler. God is as powerful at noon as at any other time, it is true; but we humans, recalling the splendor of His creation, the morning, and now witnessing the brilliant light of His creation, the noonday sun, are more forcibly reminded of His power at midday. We feel that now at the middle of the day when the physical light shines forth more splendidly the power of divine light should be more operative.

"Quench . . . cool . . . impart health." If God appears most powerful at midday, then He also appears most powerful at this time because, as we pray in the collect for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost, God shows forth His great power in a most special way by showing mercy and sparing us sinners.⁶⁹ Hence it is that, imitating Abraham of old, the Church keeps sober watch at the middle of the day, and expecting the advent of good things, lifts her eyes to heaven, for it is now that she will receive the grace prepared for her.⁷⁰

She realizes that through sin her children have assailed and sold Christ into slavery. She knows that they

69. Omnipotentiam tuam parcendo maxime et miserando manifestans.

70. Cf. Gen. 18:1-2.

deserve punishment. But recalling Christ's Old Testament type, Joseph, who, meeting his guilty brothers at noonday, rather than punishing them prepared them a banquet, she is filled with confidence.⁷¹ Christ did not spill His blood at this sixth hour for nothing. At the sight of His Bride praying He will not punish but rather fill her with the joysome banquet of resplendent traces and share with her the food of most sweet colloquy.

So it is that at the sixth hour, the hour most favorable for obtaining mercy, the Church locked in conflict with the noonday devil prays that the most powerful God would put out the fires of hate in the breasts of her children ("quench"), take away the heat of passion from their bodies ("cool"), and once more restore the calm of peace to their hearts ("impart health").

We have launched out into the deep, but yet at all time there has been a skilled helmsman guiding us. Our interpretation of Sext is none other than that of St. Ambrose himself, the author of the hymn at Sext. St. Ambrose in no place gives us an explicit explanation of either this hymn or the hour of Sext, but there is a passage in his commentary on Psalm 118 which might be considered as such. It reads:

71. Idem 43:16.

We have said that it is necessary to pray at the middle of the night. No less necessary is prayer at the same hour during the day. . . . At the middle of the night the destroying angel killed the firstborn of the Egyptians and from this is deduced that at that hour our adversary is most especially powerful. But it can be deduced from this same fact that at the middle of the day the power of divine light is most operative. Hence, Abraham, about the middle of the day was keeping sober watch and expecting the advent of some good, lifting up his eyes and surveying the countryside because at midday he sought the grace destined for him. And at that very time of day a divine guest with two angels came to him. At midday he received Christ into his dwelling.

All these mysteries which we read and understand were celebrated at the sixth hour. Indeed, when does it more behoove the man of faith to be illumined by the divine presence than when the light of day shines forth more brilliantly? Rightly, therefore, did holy Joseph, after he had received his brothers . . . hold banquet at noon. It was indeed noonday within the breast of Joseph when he served the joyous banquet of resplendent grace and shared the food of most sweet colloquy; so that although they deserved punishment from their brother whom they had assailed and sold into slavery, he told them that it was by divine judgment that he was led into Egypt so that he might give food to those enduring the famine.⁷²

As Abraham of old the Church, keeping sober watch at midday, lifts up her eyes and awaits those gifts prepared for her. "To you who live in heaven I have lifted my eyes."⁷³ And at that time when the light of day shines forth more brilliantly she becomes illumined by the divine

72. P.L. XV, 1315.

73. Psalm 122, the first psalm of Sext in the monastic Breviary.

presence and, as Abraham, receives Christ, the divine guest, into her dwelling, the hearts of her children now cleansed from sin. In thanksgiving and joy she sings, "The Lord rules me and nothing is wanting to me. He makes me to rest in a place of pasture."⁷⁴

NONE

The central thought and purpose of None is too evident to miss. Christ died on the Cross at the ninth hour, and so at the daily ninth hour when the sun sinks in the western sky and darkness, the symbol of death, draws nigh, the Church reminds her children of death and prepares them for the approaching final moment.

For worldlings the thought of the fleeting existence here below, of the fact that at any moment life may be snuffed out is one which would torture them to insanity if they really allowed themselves the wholesome practice of meditating upon it. But that we Christians should entertain no such fearsome thoughts about death is made manifest by the hymn which Mother Church gives us to pray at this hour:

O God, creation's secret force,
Thyself unmoved, all motion's source,
Who from the morn till evening's ray
Through every change dost guide the day:

74. Versicle for Sext.

Thy light at eventide impart,
That light from us may ne'er depart;
But let a hold death accord
Eternal glory with the Lord.

The Christian is not frightened by the prospect of old age and death. Rather, he prays that the evening of life may bring with it every clearer vision so that he may be able to pierce the veils of death and perceive beyond the brightness of eternal life ("Thy light at eventide impart"). He prays that he may have the grace to see death as a sacred gift, the portal which God opens for him that he may enter into everlasting glory.

Christians of an earlier age can teach us much about the proper attitude toward death. St. John Chrysostom describes for us the view which the early monks had of death--a view which the clairvoyance of the perfect Christian life alone can give. He says:

There is no such thing to be heard there as wailing and lamentation. Their roof is free from that melancholy and those cries. Deaths happen there indeed, for their bodies are not immortal, but they know not death, as death. The departed are accompanied to the grave with hymns. This they call a procession, not a burial;⁷⁵ and when it is reported that anyone is dead, great is their cheerfulness, great their pleasure; or rather not one of them can bear to say that one is dead, but that he is perfected. Then there is thanksgiving, and

75. "Procession" in the Greek gives the idea of a sending on ahead. "Burial" in Greek has the same connotation of hopeless finality as in English.

great glory, and joy, everyone praying that such may be his own end, that so his own combat may terminate, and he may rest from his labor and struggles, and may see Christ.⁷⁶

We may find the same happy perspective of death in the Roman martyrology. There our forebearers have narrated the deaths of the saints for us in such terms as, "Finally he obtained holy rest" (Jan. 1), "he took flight to the Lord" (Jan. 6), "victoriously he ascended to heaven" (Jan. 15), "he fell asleep in the Lord" (Jan. 24), "he was found worthy of eternal rewards" (Feb. 28), "he received a crown from the Lord" (Nov. 15), etc. The death which the hour of None symbolizes is not the fearsome inevitable fate awaiting the children of this world. The death for which None prepares us is not the end of all things but the perfection of all things.

THE MONASTIC GROUP

PRIME

Tierce, Sext, and None are meant to symbolize the pilgrimage of the Church here below. At Tierce the bark of St. Peter is launched into the sea of the world with the breath of the Holy Spirit, the breath of Divine Love, filling her sails, burning in the hearts of her children.

⁷⁶. Chrysostom, Commentarium in I Tim., Hom. 14; Eng. trans., as in A Library of Fathers of the Catholic Church (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1843), the volume: "Homilies of Chrysostom on Timothy," p. 125.

At Sext she encounters a terrific storm. The gentle breath of love becomes a tempestuous wind of human passions. At None all is peace again. The storm has been weathered and in the distance is seen the harbor, the port of eternity.

Prime fits quite well into this scheme of symbolism. Prime is the prayer which the sailors of the bark sing before departing, a prayer begging God to bless their journey this day.

"And rising in the morning . . . He went out (of Capharnaum) into a deserted spot, and there prayed."⁷⁷ A wonderful text to give a scriptural basis to Prime, and it would be nice if we could show that Prime developed from an attempt of the early Christians to imitate their Master who in the morning betook Himself to a desert to pray. If this were the case then Prime would have an origin similar to the hours of the nocturnal group. Or again, it would be nice to show that the hour of Prime was from ancient days an hour of private devotions and that these devotions eventually evolved into our hour of public prayer, Prime. This would give Prime an origin similar to that of the hours of the diurnal group.

But, alas! Prime is not favored with an origin as noble as its brother canonical hours. Its origin, we

⁷⁷. Mk. 1:35.

might say, smells of the very earth, so base is it. This is the story.

Towards the end of the fourth century Matins were usually recited about midnight. In some monasteries when this office was finished the monks retired until dawn when they rose for Lauds.⁷⁸ But in other monasteries the custom had developed of singing Lauds immediately after Matins. Thus, Lauds being already completed, there was no common exercise until the third hour, Tierce.⁷⁹

This latter mode of recitation was the practice in Cassian's monastery in Bethlehem. It led to great abuses and these abuses occasioned the establishment of another canonical hour, that of Prime. Cassian tells us how this happened in chapter four of the third book of his Institutions.

But you must know that this Matins (Prime) which is now very generally observed in western countries, was appointed as a canonical hour in our own day, and also in our own monastery. . . . For up till that time we find that when this office of Matins (Lauds) . . . was finished, together with the daily vigils, the remaining hours were assigned by our fathers to bodily refreshment. But when some rather carelessly abused this indulgence and prolonged their time for sleep too long, as they were not obliged by the requirements of any service to leave their cells or rise from their bed till the third hour;

78. St. Basil, Regula, Interrogatio XXXVII (P.G. XXXI, 1015. In this place Basil legislates for such an arrangement.

79. Cf. D.A.C.L. XIV, 1779.

and when, as well as losing their labor, they were drowsy from excess of sleep in the daytime, when they ought to have been applying themselves to some duties, . . . a complaint was brought to the elders by some of the brethren who were ardent in spirit and in no slight measure disturbed by this carelessness, and it was determined by them after long consideration and anxious discussion that up till sunrise, when they could be ready to read or to undertake manual labor without danger of harm, time for rest should be given to their wearied bodies, and after this they should all be summoned to the observance of this service and should rise from their beds, and by reciting three psalms and prayers . . . should at the same time by an uniform arrangement put an end to their sleep and make a beginning to their work.⁸⁰

Cassian tells us, however, that the total length of time spent in choir was not increased since the new office of Prime was made up of psalms that would ordinarily have been said earlier at Lauds. In other words, when the office of Prime became necessary Lauds was shortened by three psalms, which three psalms were then recited at the later hour of Prime.⁸¹

80. Post Nicene Fathers, XI, 215.

81. Idem, p. 216. The office of Prime has been the object of much scholarly research during the past few years. Not all agree with the traditional explanation of its origin expounded above. Jacques Froger, a monk of Solesmes, for instance, says in his book, Les Origines de Prime, Cassian in the passage quoted is not speaking of Prime at all but of Lauds. Having access to Father Froger's book only through a review in the Ephemerides Liturgicae (LXI, 366-69), I cannot say that I understand thoroughly either his position in the matter or his arguments but only that he declaims the traditional explanation of the origin of Prime as false.

A first reading of Cassian might lead us to believe that Prime affords few problems to the liturgical historian. But comparison of our present day Prime with that described by Cassian reveals that a vast development has taken place. The prayers and readings of Prime taken for granted by us of today but unknown to Cassian are mute evidence of centuries of intricate historical evolution involving, doubtless, many names of men and places of which we have never even heard. Obviously we cannot now expect to enter into all this history but one point is of too great importance to pass over in silence.

In Cassian's time the monks were expected to go to work immediately after Prime, i.e., immediately after the recitation of three psalms and of the customary prayers ending every office. By his description of Prime St. Benedict makes it evident that this was still the practice in his day. He says:

At Prime let three psalms be said. . . . At the end of the three psalms let one lesson be recited, a verse, the Kyrie eleison, with concluding prayer.⁸²

Nothing more. There were no readings from the Martyrology or from the Rule.

In later years the superiors began to take their communities to the chapter room after Prime for a conference

⁸². Regula c. XVII.

on the Rule and for the assignment of the tasks for the day. The very name "chapter" room, in fact, seems to have developed from the fact that this room was the place to which the community retired for the conference on the chapter, capitulum, of the Rule. Soon the custom of reading the Martyrology and the Necrology of the house at these gathering gained ground.⁸³ From this recitation of psalms at the first hour and this "before work" daily conference it was but a short step to the general outline of our present hour of Prime.⁸⁴

Prime seems to be almost an accident among the canonical hours. Cassian already noted this but added that surely its institution was providential. He says:

Although it may seem to have arisen out of an accident. . . yet Prime clearly makes up according to the letter that number which the blessed David indicates, "Seven times a day do I praise Thee because of Thy righteous judgments." For by the addition of this service we certainly hold these spiritual assemblies seven times a day and are shown to sing praise to God seven times a day.⁸⁵

We may add to Cassian's observations that perhaps Prime is providential for other reasons. Prime has developed into a beautiful daily prayer said at the beginning of the day in order to consecrate every word, thought, and action of the day to God.

83. Cf. Cabrol, op. cit., p. 145.

84. Cf. Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. XII, p. 424b.

85. Institutions, III, 4. Eng. trans. Nicene Fathers XI, p. 215.

O Lord God Almighty, who has brought us to the beginning of this day, defend us this day by Thy power, so that we may fall this day into no sin, but so that our every word, thought, and deed, may be directed to the accomplishment of Your justice. Through Christ, our Lord, Your Son, Amen.

And again:

O Lord God, King of heaven and earth, deign this day to direct, sanctify, rule, and govern our hearts, our bodies, our mind, our words, and our actions according to Your law, so that we may do the works of Your commandments and with Your assistance, O Savior of the world, be free and safe both here and in eternity, who lives and reigns forever, amen.

The words of a modern writer commenting on these prayers will help us to understand and pray Prime better. He writes:

We are often reminded of, and we constantly impress upon others, the necessity of making an offering of our day to God as soon as we awake in the morning. Surely there is no more comprehensive formula for a "morning offering" than the one we make when we repeat these splendid prayers at the beginning of our day. It is nothing short of a tragedy if, through thoughtlessness, coldness, or routine, we allow these noble words to slip from our lips without our mind heeding their meaning. Far be it from us to disparage or speak lightly of any of the innumerable "aids to devotion" devised by modern piety. Yet there may be priests who are careful to make the "morning offering," which they are expected to make as associates of the "Apostleship of Prayer," who perhaps overlook the fact that they are given a daily opportunity of directing the thoughts, words, and deeds of each day, in words which have an immense momentum in them, so to speak, inasmuch as they are no mere private prayer, but the official and public consecration of the Bride of Jesus Christ who thus dedicates the day to His service.⁸⁶

86. Hom. and Past. XXV, 943-44.

COMPLINE

"Seven time is the day I have sung praises to you." As we have just seen, Cassian thought this prophecy was perfectly fulfilled by the addition of Prime to the canonical hours. St. Benedict thought otherwise. Matins, Lauds, Prime, Tierce, Sext, None, and Vespers do indeed add up to seven daily hours of praise, but St. Benedict infers that Cassian is mistaken in enumerating Matins with the other hours in order to reach the number seven. St. Benedict says that the nocturnal hour of Matins is meant to fulfill the prophecy, "At the middle of the night I have risen to praise you." To the six remaining hours he added that of Compline so that both prophecies would be fulfilled.⁸⁷

"Omnes ergo in unum positi, compleant" (Therefore, when all are gathered together, let them sing Compline).⁸⁸ Compline is the Benedictine office par excellence. It is from St. Benedict that this night prayer received its name. However, we must not make the mistake of attributing the first institution of this office to St. Benedict. We do not know who was the first to say Compline, only that it was not Benedict. Nor are we even certain

⁸⁷. Regula, c. XVI.

⁸⁸. Idem, c. XLII.

why it was ever said at all. One author offers the following conjecture regarding its origin:

Just as Prime is the Church' official morning prayer, so is Compline her night prayer. Since Lauds were intended to greet the dawn of day, it was soon found that too long an interval separated this office from that of Tierce: hence a subsidiary morning prayer was instituted at an early date. When it became an almost universal practice to celebrate Vespers at a comparatively early hour of the afternoon, the need of another office came to be felt.⁸⁹

Hence, Compline was born. The conjecture attracts our fancy, but it is no more than conjecture.

Of this, however, we can be sure, that Compline was in existence fully one hundred years before Benedict penned his Rule. St. Basil gives us evidence that around the year 350 it was already an accepted canonical hour in the east in some monasteries. After describing the other hours of the day he says:

And again when night comes on we must beg that the rest we enjoy may be free from harm and vice. At this hour the nintieth psalm must again be said.⁹⁰

In the West St. Ambrose is perhaps the first to mention this night prayer. In his exhortation to virgins he writes:

Frequent prayers commend us to God. If the prophet who was occupied with the business of a kingdom could say: "Seven times in the day I have sung

89. Hom. & Past. XXV, 1278-79.

90. St. Basil, Regula (P.G. XXXI, 1015). "Must again be said," for he regulates that the psalm is also to be used at Sext because of the verse, Non timebis... ab incursu et daemónio meridiano.

praises to you," what does it behoove us to do who read, "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation"?⁹¹ Surely, solemn prayers and thanksgiving should be offered when we rise from sleep, when we go forth to work, when we prepare to eat, after we have eaten, at the hour of incense, and finally when we go to bed.⁹²

Compline is mentioned again in another fifth century manuscript, the so-called rule of St. Augustine, which after enumerating the other hours adds the instruction, "And before sleep let the usual psalms be said."⁹³

In the West, however, it seems that this night prayer was not considered one of the canonical hours.⁹⁴ Before Benedict's time Compline was in a very rudimentary form, subject to local variations, and probably not even known in a good many localities. It was because of St. Benedict's legislation in his Rule, which came to be the one rule of Western monasticism, that Compline was adopted everywhere, that it was raised to a canonical state, and that it received the impetus which led to its insertion as an integral part into the liturgy. It is for these reasons that Compline can be called the Benedictine contribution to the canonical hours, and not because St. Benedict was its originator.

91. Matt. 26:41.

92. P.L. XVI, 225.

93. Cf. Callewaert, *op. cit.*, p. 198. Cf. also the life of St. Hypatius in the Acta Sanctorum V. III of June, p. 325, for another reference to the early recitation of Compline.

94. Idem, p. 198, note 5.

In the final determination which Compline received in the hands of St. Benedict the central thought of the hour is quite easy to perceive. Compline is meant to be the complement of Prime. Prime is the hour at which we beg God to bless the day and the work we hope to do. Compline is the hour at which we beg God to bless the night and the rest we hope to enjoy. We are told in the first prayer of Compline that the devil will not rest even during the night hours but will be abroad as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. The remainder of the hour down to every verse of each psalm is a prayer of absolute confidence in God, our Father. Our help comes from Him whose power creates and sustains heaven and earth. He will protect us during the night.

The hours of sleep are for the Christian the sacramental sign of the eternal rest of beatitude. At the close of the day, therefore, when he is reciting the prayer which is to prepare him for rest, the monk will heed that admonition of St. Benedict, "Keep death daily before thy eyes."⁹⁵ All that was said about death when we discussed the hour of None might be repeated

95. Regula, c. IV.

here, but let a quotation from St. Gertrude, which so well expresses the thoughts which should fill our minds at this last hour of the days, suffice both to complete our consideration of Compline and to bring this paper to a close:

Who will give me, O God, to be made perfect in Thee, to be set free by death . . . and to return home . . . ? What bliss to see Thee, O God, and to possess Thee for all eternity! At the hour of my death be Thou near to comfort me; bless me then, and let Thy presence be to me the fair dawn of the resplendent day I will spend gazing upon Thee. And now, O Love, I leave my soul and my earthly life with Thee: I will lay me down and take my rest in Thee in peace. Amen.⁹⁶

96. St. Gertrude, Exercises, V.

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