

## THE DIVINE OFFICE AS A METHOD OF PRAYER

BY

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A PRIEST of my acquaintance once told me that when he was a young religious, he had had a great devotion to the divine office. In order to get the best out of it, he decided to make a careful study of the psalms. So he got out the best commentaries and studied their meaning in Latin and Hebrew; and when he had finished, he found that the psalms had ceased to have any meaning to him as prayer at all. 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 that study of a certain kind can be an obstacle rather than an assistance to prayer.

There is no doubt that for a great many priests and religious, if not the majority, the divine office is not a congenial method of prayer. It is a duty which has to be performed, which has its own special grace and virtue, but it is not generally felt as a personal method of prayer and approach to God. The reasons for this are many, and were analysed with great discernment by Père Bouyer in an article in *Maison-Dieu*. It is partly that a different method of prayer, based ultimately on the exercises of St Ignatius, has come to be a normal training in prayer for a long time: partly also that the divine office, like the liturgy of the Church in general, has come to seem rather remote from modern ways of thought and feeling. It represents an august and venerable tradition, but it is an exceedingly complex structure and may not seem of much practical application to the needs of the present day.

These are serious objections, and it is not going to be easy to make the divine office the living, personal act of prayer which it ought to be. The problem can certainly not be solved by study. One of the difficulties of the divine office is that it is so complex; and an analytical study tends to increase its complexity. It seems to us that there is need for an entirely different approach to it: an approach which will tend to reduce it to a more and more complete simplicity. We must always remember that prayer is an essentially simple act. It is the 'raising of the heart and mind to

God'. All the words which we make use of are only intended to awaken this simple act of the intellect and will by which we are united with God.

The first object of every method of prayer must therefore be to bring about a state of *recollection*. Now this is precisely what the divine office can most easily do, if it is used in the right way. 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. It is not a matter of attending studiously to the meaning of the words, but rather of withdrawing the mind from distractions as they arise and letting the rhythm of the words gradually assert its influence. At first it may be sufficient to attend to one or two words which constantly recur, like '*dominus*' and '*deus*'. If every time these words occur in the psalmody, one were to make an act of 'raising the heart and mind to God', this would be in itself a prayer perfect.

But we must be careful not to think of this act of attention to God as any kind of 'thinking about' God. We cannot assert too strongly that prayer is not essentially discursive thought. It is rather a withdrawal of the mind from other considerations—an act of detachment—by which it is brought to rest in the presence of God. This is the disposition of the mind at which we have to aim from the beginning of our prayer. It cannot be forced; but if we seek it consistently, it will be found to arise gradually. When it has been attained, then it will be found that the meaning of the psalms begins to impress itself on us, not as a result of our own effort, but by the action of grace, or more precisely, of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is these gifts, which we all possess in virtue of our baptism and confirmation, which dispose the soul to receive the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and which enlighten the mind in understanding. They create in us those habits of the fear of God, of piety and fortitude, of counsel and knowledge, of understanding and wisdom, which the psalms invite us to exercise. Thus the psalms should be regarded as the means by which these gifts of the Holy Spirit may be brought into act. Their function is to dispose us to receive light and grace from above. If we approach the divine office in this way, we shall see that it is a sacrament in the original meaning of the word. The psalms and the rest of the sacred liturgy are not simply human words: they are the means by which the mystery of the Word is

revealed to us. The whole of the divine office and the sacred liturgy, as Dom Odo Casel declared so impressively, is a 'mystery' in this sense. It is the means by which the divine mystery itself is made present to us and reveals itself to us. If, then, we approach the divine office as a sacrament, through which we are to be brought into the presence of God, we shall find that God gradually reveals himself to us. This revelation may be conveniently considered in three parts: first the revelation of the mystery of God, then that of the mystery of Christ, and finally that of the mystery of the Church. To begin with the first, if we start, as has been suggested, simply with the words '*dominus*' and '*deus*' and try to allow them to exercise all their power over us, we shall find that other words begin to group themselves round them, revealing the personal relationship in which God stands to us. Thus Psalm xvii begins: *Diligam te, domine, fortitudo mea, dominus firmamentum meum et refugium meum et liberator meus. Deus meus adjutor meus et sperabo in eum.* 'I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my firmament, my refuge and my deliverer. My God is my helper, and in him will I put my trust.' Here we have an expression of faith, and hope and love, which takes us into the very heart of the divine mystery, and gives inexhaustible food for prayer. It is on passages such as these that we need to sustain our prayer till they colour the whole of our outlook. Then again take Psalm xxxv with the verses beginning: '*Domine, in caelo misericordia tua et veritas tua usque ad nubes*', 'O Lord, thy mercy is in heaven, and thy truth reaches even unto the clouds', and culminating in the verse '*Quoniam apud te est fons vitae et in lumine tuo videbimus lumen*', 'For with thee is the fountain of life; and in thy light shall we see light.' Notice how the images presented to us here, of the sky and the clouds, of water and light, create an atmosphere in which the inner mystery of the Godhead is disclosed. Finally take Psalm lxxii, which Lagrange has said marks the highest point of piety in the Old Testament, with its concluding words: '*Quid enim mihi est in caelo et a te quid volui super terram?*' and '*Mihi adhaerere deo bonum est; ponere in domino deo spem meam*'. 'For what have I in heaven? And besides thee what do I desire upon earth? . . . But it is good for me to adhere to my God, to put my hope in the Lord God.'

These are only isolated instances of themes which run through the psalms like a counterpoint: and we have to learn to recognise

them as they appear, until we see how they underlie the whole structure of the psalmody. For we must never lose sight of the fact that the psalms and the whole of the divine office form a single whole: they are all elements in an organic structure. We do not want to isolate particular elements and study them apart, but rather to acquire a 'sense of the whole', an awareness of the underlying rhythm and harmony, which makes the divine office a unity. Precisely the same principle is present here as in the Scriptures. Modern criticism has tended to divide up the Scriptures and to analyse them by means of historical and literary criticism, until all sense of their unity is lost. But though this critical process has its value and cannot be neglected, yet it is far more important to learn to see the underlying unity of the Scriptures, to grasp the supernatural principle which makes them all part of an organic whole, and relates all the different and diverse 'words' of Scripture to the one Word which is revealed in them. It is so also with the divine office, though here the task is made infinitely easier; because the divine office has been constructed so as to bring out continually the underlying unity of the Scriptures, to relate the Old Testament to the New; and where the relationship is obscure, to bring in the commentaries of the Fathers to make it clear.

This brings us to the second 'mystery' which is revealed in the divine office—the mystery of Christ: for it is in Christ the Word that the whole of the Scriptures and the whole of the divine office is centred. But here again we must beware of forming a too human picture of Christ. We have to accustom ourselves to the Old Testament approach to Christ, which is also that of the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church. Christ is revealed as the Messiah, the King of Psalm ii, who says, '*Ego autem constitutus sum rex ab eo super Sion montem sanctum ejus*'; 'But I am appointed King by him over Sion his holy mountain'; who is also the Suffering Servant of Psalm xxi, who cries, '*Ego sum vermis et non homo, opprobrium hominum et abjectio plebis*'; 'I am a worm and no man, the reproach of men and the outcast of the people.' He is also the Priest of the Psalm of Vespers (cix), of whom it is said, '*Tu es sacerdos in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedec*'; 'Thou art a priest for ever according to the order of Melchisedec.' This archetypal figure of the King who is also a priest, and who still more mysteriously offers himself as victim, underlies the whole of the Psalter and indeed of the Old Testament. By this means

Christ is seen to be the representative of all mankind: for Melchisedec is not a Jew or a priest of the Old Law. As Père Danielou has pointed out in a recent book on Advent, he is the representative of man under the natural law, the 'covenant of the natural universe'. It is as the representative of mankind before God, therefore, that Christ is presented to us in the Psalter: mankind suffering under the burden of sin, aspiring towards God and finally raised to a seat at the right hand of God. Thus the shadow of the New Testament is seen to be cast on the Old: Adam who represents mankind is, in St Paul's words, 'a type of him who was to come': Abel slain by Cain; Noe saved from the Flood; Isaac offered in sacrifice as an only son; Jacob labouring for Rachel; Joseph sold into slavery by his brethren; Israel in bondage in Egypt; all are types of Christ, as are David and Solomon, Job and Jonah and Daniel. This is the 'mystery' of Christ, the mystery of the redemption of the world wrought by suffering and sacrifice and death, the victory of the Cross.

We have, then, to try to make use of the psalms in order to enter into this mystery of Christ, not simply to reflect upon it, but to participate in it and share its saving power. We have to remember always that Christ speaks in the psalms as the representative of mankind and therefore of ourselves before God. Each of us is called to share in the priesthood and the kingship and, above all, in the suffering of Christ: we can therefore make the psalms our own prayer. St Athanasius brings this out in a little treatise on the psalms, which perfectly reflects the place which the psalms held in the prayer of the Church in his time. 'In other books of Scripture', he says, 'we read or hear the words of holy men as belonging only to those who spoke them, not at all as though they were our own; and in the same way the doings there narrated are to us material for wonder and examples to be followed, but not in any sense things we have done ourselves. With this book, however, though one does read the Prophecies about the Saviour in that way with reverence and with awe, in the case of all the other psalms it is as though they were one's own words that one read; and anyone who hears them is moved at heart, as though they voiced for him his deepest thoughts.'<sup>1</sup> It may, in fact, be said that our growth in prayer can be measured by the extent to which we are able to enter into the psalms and make their thought

1. *St Athanasius on the Psalms*, rendered into English by a Religious of C.S.M.V. p.20.

our own. But this again is not something which can be acquired by our own labours: it is the gift of the Spirit, which can alone teach us to understand the psalms in the light of the Word.

We come now to the third great mystery which is enshrined in the psalms, the mystery of the Church. Each of us is not only an individual member of the Body of Christ, sharing uniquely in the mystery of Christ and drawing near through him as an individual person to God. We are also members of a society, of a people which has its history and its law, which constitutes a city and a kingdom. It is of this that St Augustine wrote: 'We give the name City of God to that society of which the scripture bears witness, and which has got the most excellent authority and pre-eminence of all other works whatsoever, by the disposing of divine providence and not by the affection of men's judgments. For there it is said: "Glorious things are spoken of thee, thou City of God": and in another place, "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised, in the City of our God, even upon his holy mountain, increasing the joy of all the earth." And by and by in the same psalm: "As we have heard, so have we seen in the City of the Lord of Hosts, in the City of our God: God has established it forever." And in another: "The river's streams shall make glad the City of God, the most High has sanctified his tabernacle, God is in the midst of it unmoved." These testimonies and a thousand more teach us that there is a city of God, whereof his inspired love makes us desire to be members.'<sup>2</sup> The Old Testament gives us the history of this earthly city or Kingdom of God and its conflicts with its neighbouring peoples and the psalms reflect both the history and the morality of the Old Testament. But in the New Testament we are taught to identify the City with the 'new Jerusalem, the Jerusalem, which is above, and is free, which is our mother'. So we are able to identify the Israel of the Old Testament with what St Paul calls the 'Israel of God', that is, with the Church. But it is the Church regarded not merely as an earthly, visible institution, but as the society of redeemed mankind, embracing all peoples and all history, and revealed in its true nature only when it is seen 'coming down out of heaven from God', as St John sees it in the Apocalypse. As the Old Testament idea of the City of God is thus transfigured when it is seen in the light of the New Testament, so also the Old Testament morality is transformed. The

2. St Augustine's *City of God*, Book XI, Ch. 1 (trans. Healey).

conflict of Israel with its enemies which the psalms reflect, is seen to be a conflict 'not with flesh and blood, but with the principedoms and powers, with those who have the mastery of the world in these dark days, with malign influences in an order higher than ours'.<sup>3</sup> The conflict is no less real because these powers of evil are seen at work in all the nations of today and have a hold in every human heart, including not least our own. But we can never identify 'the enemy' with any particular people or person, just as we can never identify the City of God with the actual visible Church at any moment in its history. This gradual transfiguration of the visible, material order of the Old Testament into the eternal, invisible order in which it finds its true meaning in the New Testament is the 'mystery' which underlies all the Scriptures. It is a mystery which, once again, we cannot fathom by our own intelligence: it is a mystery of the Spirit.

It was the Holy Spirit which came upon the apostles at Pentecost, which taught them to interpret the Scriptures and to see how Christ is revealed in them: and it is only in so far as we are enlightened by the same Spirit that we can interpret them for ourselves. But the Holy Spirit does not only enlighten our minds in the meaning of the Scriptures: it is itself the power by which the Scriptures are inspired and by which the revelation which they contain is unfolded. Now this revelation is itself an event; it is contained in a history which is unfolded through the course of time, and we ourselves are called to participate in that event and to be transformed in our inmost being by its power. We have to share as members of the Church in the history of Israel, in its baptism in the Red Sea, in its Exodus from Egypt, in its wandering in the desert, in the crossing of the Jordan, in the entry into the Promised Land: just as we have to share as members of Christ in his life and death and resurrection, in his ascension and his triumph over the powers of this world. It is as the sacramental means by which we enter into the mystery of Christ and the Church, by which we not only learn about it but actually share in its redemptive powers, that we have to approach the divine office no less than the mass. We have to learn to see not only the Church and the liturgy, but the whole of this visible universe and the whole history of mankind as a great sacrament, in which God is being revealed.

3. Ephesians 6, 12 (trans. Knox).

But this revelation is not static but dynamic. The visible creation is at all times in a state of transformation by which it is passing into the invisible order of the new creation. In the same way human history in its temporal process is for ever being transfigured by the power of God into the eternal order of the kingdom of heaven. Now the sphere within which this transformation takes place is the Church, and the power by which it is transfigured is the Holy Spirit, and it is through the action of the mass and the liturgy of the Church that we ourselves enter upon this process of transformation. For the sacramental order of the Church, like the sacramental order of the visible universe which it completes and fulfils, is the means by which the eternal mystery is revealed to man. By the visible signs of the sacraments and the intelligible signs of Scripture and tradition the eternal, invisible, unchanging Being of God is made known to us through these temporal and visible signs, which at the same time reveal God and communicate him to us. We need these signs and we must always make use of them, because they are the means ordained by God for our salvation. But at the same time we must never forget that they are signs, that they point to something beyond themselves. So it is that through the signs and symbols of the liturgy, of the psalms and scriptures and the tradition of the Church, we are led to the contemplation of the divine mystery itself, to that which is beyond all words and images and thoughts. Thus by beginning to use our office as a method of recollection, we may be led through all the stages of the purgative and illuminative way, passing out of Egypt through the Red Sea and the wilderness under the Cloud of Contemplation until we approach the mountain of God and the divine darkness which envelopes Mount Sinai.

If now we may attempt to sum up the characteristic of the divine office as a method of prayer, we may say that it is threefold. In the first place it is *symbolic*. It is not, as we have insisted, primarily a method of discursive thought or of theological reflection. It has to be approached rather as we approach a poem; and, after all, the psalms, which make up the greatest part of it, are poetry. Its meaning has to be grasped not by a process of rational analysis but by that knowledge by 'sympathy', which Maritain has shown to be characteristic of all poetic understanding. The meaning has to be grasped as a whole and from within, so that the

symbols of which it is composed exercise their power over us and introduce us into a whole world, a cosmos, of which they hold the key. But the symbols of the liturgy are not merely natural symbols; they are supernatural signs, akin to the sacraments themselves, which produce a supernatural effect in us and communicate the divine mystery, which they contain, to our souls. In this sense the divine office may be called '*sacramental*'. It is a system of signs or symbols, which manifests the Word of God to us and communicates the grace of the Spirit. If we submit ourselves to its influence and let its special grace act upon us, we ourselves are transformed by its power and enter into the mystery of Christ and the Church. Finally the divine office is *communal* or catholic in the widest and deepest sense of the word. It is a prayer which embraces all mankind and reveals the meaning of all history. Through it we enter into that order of grace, which is the Kingdom or City of God, and we take our place as members of a whole, of a society, which extends through time and space but which finds its fulfilment in an order of being beyond time and space, beyond all words and thoughts, in the 'new creation' in which God himself dwells. We can indeed apply to ourselves the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews and say, as we approach the divine office and the mass: 'The scene of your approach now is Mount Sion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the City of the living God: here are gathered thousands upon thousands of angels: here is the assembly of these first-born sons whose names are written in heaven: here is God sitting in judgment upon all men, here are the spirits of just men made perfect; here is Jesus, the spokesman of the new covenant, and the sprinkling of his blood, which has better things to say than Abel's had.'<sup>4</sup>

4. Hebrews 12, 22-24 (trans. Knox).