

RECITING DIVINE OFFICE

BY

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IN March 1946 the editors of *La Vie Spirituelle* printed a questionnaire relative to the recitation of the Divine Office. In January 1947 under the title 'Lauda Jerusalem Dominum' they published a summary of the 345 answers received. These were from priests, nuns and the laity most, though not all, of whom were tertiaries. While in most cases replies showed great attachment to the practice, comments on the length and language of the Office—as well as on the attitude of mind of many recitants raise some interesting problems. It was also seen that despite the goodwill shown towards their obligation (priests) or practice (laity), many were far from understanding the Church's end in establishing this. The book therefore includes a valuable chapter, 'Towards a better understanding of the Office', setting forth the origin, history and purpose of the breviary and another on the question of Latin.

The editor of 'Lauda Jerusalem Dominum' confesses his difficulty in summarising and arranging the many varied and often contradictory replies. There rarely seemed a 'type' answer to any question. All were individual and interesting. The present writer, also, apologises for omissions and choice of selections necessitated by space in this further condensation. Those interested would do well to buy the book and read it for themselves¹. Besides the answers and the chapters referred to above there is valuable reading on the prayer of praise and the liturgical year.

The majority of priests assert their devotion to the obligation of reciting the Office. From members of Orders who habitually recite (or chant) it in choir replies were usually simple and straightforward. They find the greatest satisfaction in their Office as communal and choral prayer. Thus performed it cements community life and encourages fraternal charity and reinforces in the priest an awareness of his peculiar function as link between God and man.

In comments of the secular clergy we find much variety and many interesting suggestions. For many the breviary is a joy and consolation, a fount of spiritual refreshment and a pledge of union with God. Others speak of the freedom which they find in this particular obedience and the perfection of the prayers in the sanctifying of each day of the liturgical year. 'I love my Office and thank the Church for having imposed it upon her priests', writes one.

Despite this, the majority of secular priests find full recitation

¹ Obtainable from Blackfriars, Oxford, price 2s.

a burden among their multifarious duties. Some consider it unsuitable for solitary recitation. Most wish it was shorter and more intelligible. The Vulgate text is sometimes obscure and in some cases even untranslatable. This makes it for many an almost intolerable burden. Read mechanically and dutifully by such, it has no devotional appeal and occupies time desired for private prayer. These consider life liturgically inspired by this means, a beautiful, unrealisable ideal. 'The breviary is for life, not life for the breviary', writes the outspoken professor of a seminary who calls for sweeping changes if the book is to be of effective use. Others consider that too much time is given in training priests in the mode of recitation and too little to the spiritual content. Many who wish to 'pray' the Office, pausing before some fruitful passage, find that choral recitation or the exigencies of parochial duties (seculars) prevents this. From this arises the suggestion that the obligation should be not one of total hours but of *time* spent in recitation, duly safeguarded by obligations of conscience as to degree of attention, 'pronunciation' etc., 'for the benefit of those who wish to pray rather than to recite prayers'.

One priest argues that the total volume of prayer rising from the Church is what matters and that individual contributions should be shortened and simplified. Younger men, he states, have not the physique of the old country curés who rose at five o'clock to say Matins and Lauds before a seven o'clock or earlier Mass. He considers that time spent over Office interferes with apostolic efforts and participation with the laity in Catholic Action. He, like many, is opposed to anticipation of hours but admits that in modern circumstances this is a deplorable necessity. 'Early to bed and early to rise', the sole principle by which Office can be recited at the appropriate times, would only widen the already wide gap between the priest and his people.

Quamprimum is generally deplored. Saying hours at the proper times, as far as possible, is found to be more fruitful. Office spread over the day keeps the recitants in the presence of God, and gives a sense of elasticity and leisure; *il ne faut pas être pressé avec le Bon Dieu*. It encourages detachment from worldly affairs and helps the priest to become first and foremost a man of prayer, servant of God and the Church. One curé recites his office aloud in his church at the appropriate times beginning with Matins and Lauds between six and seven, followed by half an hour's private meditation on one of the lessons. He finds that the two to two and a half hours *à cette psalmodie* well spent and no loss to his parochial duties. A monk makes the suggestion that the nocturns of Matins should be separated and said at intervals. He considers that a short

time for prayer 'ten times a day' would be physically and mentally less exhausting than a solid block of recitation.

Most agree that the psalms are difficult to understand. Those, and they are many, who deliberately set themselves to study their meaning and application have found this a task infinitely worth the undertaking. Others, not so painstaking, confess their bewilderment over too many passages. While a few speak gratefully of training in understanding the breviary received in their particular seminaries, too many consider that the devotional aspect is neglected for the historic side. All are agreed that after ordination the priest should continue biblical and patristic studies and read commentaries on the psalms to prevent staleness but many speak of the difficulty of obtaining such books. One such complaint comes from Canada. The new psalter is approved by the few who seem to have seen it.

While secular priests are free in theory to distribute the hours over the day, their usual resort is to a *blocage* not usually desired. From the monks come many regrets for anticipation, especially of Compline recited in the middle of the day. A Dominican considers that hours of study would be more fruitful if interrupted at regular intervals for the day hours.

Pleas for the vernacular come not only from priests with insufficient Latin for their own needs. They come from many, good scholars themselves, who consider rather the benefit to the Church if priests and people could recite Office together in the mother tongue. Many secular clergy sigh for common recitation with fellow-priests or alternatively for an office adapted to solitary recitation.

The falling off (in France) of attendance at the once popular parochial Vespers is attributed not only to modern secular trends but to a lack of understanding by the faithful of words and ceremonies. A vernacular liturgy combined with instruction is recommended as a step to renewing the old custom.

Replies from nuns touch a more personal set of problems, chiefly devotional or concerned with Latin. There is a general desire from those who recite the little Office of Our Lady that this might be replaced by the Divine Office, if only for Octaves, Sundays and feasts. Nuns are generally against *blocage*, as are the secular clergy. They are unanimously in favour of the psalms, finding in them spiritual food and their link with the universal Church.

While nuns of certain teaching orders deplore their inadequate training in understanding the breviary during novitiate, contemplatives speak gratefully of having received this. The latter say that their understanding deepens with the years as the often repeated words weld themselves into their lives.

Ignorance of Latin is often acknowledged usually with deep regret. Nevertheless a few consider the lack as an advantage by giving them a 'sense' of the Office which detailed knowledge of the words would, they feel, somehow destroy. One finds total ignorance very restful. Nevertheless very few would prefer the vernacular, the majority favouring Latin recitation with a translation under their eyes for reference. Nuns do not care for the new psalter nor, unlike the priests, do they wish for alterations in the breviary. Their conservatism in these matters is traced to devotion to the traditions of their respective orders and to the sense which the present form of the Office gives them of being in touch with the whole Church.

'Le Latin est langue sacrale, une langue vulgaire donnerait à l'Office une caractère profane', writes one. However, one or two would like the lessons and the homilies in the vernacular. One suggests Latin for public, the vernacular for private recitation.

The nuns are overwhelmingly aware that the Office should be prayed and be prepared for by prayer and study. They prefer recitation in choir to private. To contemplatives the Office is, after the Mass, their greatest joy. Members of active orders do not, especially in convents 'bien réglée', in general find Office a burden but rather a time of rest and refreshment which fortifies them for their work and for the difficulties of community life. Their replies show them to have real understanding of the aims and purpose of the liturgy.

Replies received from 110 lay persons are interesting and varied. For the laity the burning problem is that of time. How to fit Divine Office or even the Little Office (which the majority recite) into an already full day? Many of them speak of the fatigue, physical and mental, which the task engenders but never with the least regret.

Not being bound by vow to full recitation, the laity do not resort to *blocage* of hours. These they usually disperse throughout the day, though many can only manage a portion in the morning and evening. The varied horaries are interesting, some taking an odd quarter of an hour as occasion arises, others having regular short periods of 'rest and refreshment with God' as they are usually found to be even in the most unpromising circumstances. Thus hours are said in buses, trains and quiet corners of cafés. The time taken for all the hours at intervals is usually estimated at two to two and a half hours.

Some say Prime, Vespers and Compline regularly, others the day hours only. Matins is usually considered too long unless it is that of the Little Office. This is the Office usually said though many would prefer the Divine Office. One who had the habit of rising in the small hours to say Lauds had to abandon the practice. An

oblate snatched the time when her children were at meals to say the day hours.

Tertiaries frequently find the Little Office too monotonous and regret that it does not follow the liturgical year. Sometimes these substitute the Divine Office entirely while many recite this on Sundays and feasts. Others make an ingenious amalgamation of the two, e.g. Vespers, Compline and Prime from the Breviary as the simplest solution. Others adventurously 'compose' an office to suit themselves. This is not favoured by the editor who, while applauding the good intention considers the practice capricious and the element of personal choice contrary to the spirit of the Church.

Some enthusiasts make parts of the Office a family institution with success. Children delight in family Vespers and/or Compline. Such parents bring their children up liturgically and encourage short psalms for morning prayers and teach them the *Magnificat* or the *Benedictus*. Some families say the entire Office together on Saturday and Sunday.

One correspondent suggests that there should be Catholic broadcasts of family Compline on Sunday which could be chanted at home. Many persons living alone long for a 'gathering of two or three' with whom to recite Office. Few families have a chapel and praying seems to be done mainly in 'la chambre de Maman'.

Approach to the Office by the laity seems generally to begin with the Little Office (tertiaries). Other factors have been, proximity to a Benedictine monastery, Catholic Action groups, including scouts, days of Christian Recollection and the Society of the Magnificat (Belgium). Many deplore lack of instruction in the psalms in Catholic schools. An Englishwoman writes that doctrine, too often desiccated in instruction, comes alive in the psalms. A converted Jew sees, in knowledge and understanding of the psalms, a hope for the conversion of Israel and a blow to anti-semitism.

A small minority are bewildered by the psalms but the majority speak movingly of the benefit given by these to their spiritual lives of which they are the foundation, the strength and repose. Space forbids quoting even a few of the beautiful tributes which men and women, married and single, pay to the psalms. Their nobility and beauty, their appropriateness to all times and moods are stressed as is the fact that they were above all the prayer of our Lord. This personal attachment seems emphasised more by nuns and the laity than by priests, whose replies on the whole are more concerned with intellectual problems of arrangement and recitation.

Some, pressed for time or opportunity, try to pray in the spirit of each hour, regularly and at the appropriate times. Many do biblical studies, based on the daily lessons. An Englishwoman

makes a plea for leaflets such as the Bible Reading Fellowship of the Church of England produces, but following the daily lessons and with reference to the liturgical year.

The question of language is important for the laity. The majority understand Latin badly or not at all. Many use a translation entirely, some do on alternate days. This seems a favoured practice by those who love Latin and hope to become familiar with it in time. Some who habitually use Latin resort to a translation in times of fatigue or hurry.

The topic of vernacular services in Church raised 'heated polemics' which are not given. All admit the necessity for a working knowledge of Church Latin. One tertiary wrote sadly that 'in Senegambia even the lowest classes of negroes take the trouble to learn Arabic in order to read the Koran'.

While most tertiaries cling to the form of Office enjoined by their rule, many feel that this cuts them off from the main stream of the Church's prayer. Some make use of a shortened breviary designed for the laity such as that published by the American Benedictines (*A Shorter Breviary, Volksbrevier, Laienbrevier*, etc.). There is also a fairly general desire for an 'official' office specially composed for the needs of a twentieth century laity. This the editor deploras as being due to a total misunderstanding of the aims of the Church. The Divine Office is, he asserts, the prayer of the *Christian people* presided over by the hierarchy and participated in by the people. He refrains from publishing details of the varied plans for 'improving' the liturgy and contents himself with saying that these show genuine love of the psalms, the scriptures and a liturgical life.

Falling off in attendance at parochial Vespers is traced to the growth of atheism and modern trends in favour of amusements, secular gatherings, lack of understanding of language and ceremony, paid choirs and florid music. An unsympathetic attitude of the clergy to lay participation in the service is also referred to. 'La paroisse apparait aux fidèles comme une organisation administrative et non comme maison de prière.' Where the priest is sympathetic and zealous parish Vespers retain their popularity.

There is also a suggestion that nuns might play a part in instructing the laity in the meaning of and procedure at ceremonies. They might also by saying certain parts of the Office aloud in the church (always with permission of the parish priest) encourage the participation of the faithful in such hours as Prime, Vespers and Compline. Many of the laity regret that priests do not in sermons give the public any inkling of the treasure which remains locked from them between the pages of the breviary.