

Some Thoughts on the Office

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It is easy to become routine in reciting the Office, especially in the long weeks after Pentecost.

And more so when several feasts in the same week indicate for Morning Prayer Psalms, Sunday Week I. For the Christmas and Easter Octaves this marks the whole week.

One answer to that is to use instead the psalms of Sunday Week 2 or 4. Or e.g. Evening Prayer I of the Common of the Blessed Virgin Mary or of the Sacred Heart.

This also avoids the last section of the third Psalm (Ps 149) dealing with vengeance "A two-edged sword in their hand...."

Some suggestions:

The opening hymn to Morning and Evening Prayer, if it lends itself, can be sung.

To vary the Benedictus and Magnificat, the Icet text (end of book) can be used.

Morning Prayer could be replaced by Prayer during the Day.

The Evening Office could sometimes be replaced by Night Prayer. The hymns for Night Prayer, nos 109-116 (pp 455-460) can be used to vary the hymns for Evening Prayer.

Some hymns at the start of an Office could well be replaced by another.

The Response after the morning Scripture reading can be monotonous, especially in Lent ("It is he who will free me from the snare of the hunter.") But this responsory may be omitted (see page xlvi in the Office book.)

For Evening Prayer, Week 1/3 Thursday: the opening hymn has a rather childish rhythm and wording:

When God had filled the earth with life
And blessed it to increase,
The cattle dwelt with creeping things, (?)
And lion with lamb at peace. (?)

He gave them vast, untrodden lands,
With plants (?) to be their food;

Then God saw all that he had made
And found it very good. (clap, children.)

(Contrast the hymn, Evening prayer, Friday Week 1/3):

When God made man he gave him all the earth,
All growing things, with every bird and beast;
Then Adam named them at the Lord's command,
Subdued the greatest of them, and the least.

In his own image God created man,
And when from dust he fashioned Adam's face,
The likeness of his only Son was formed:
His Word incarnate, filled with truth and grace.

Perhaps one has to put up in winter with:

"Now that the daylight fills the sky" (Morning Prayer, Wednesday Week 2/4)

There's the childish rhyme and unscriptural Hymn for Morning Prayer, Week 2/4 Thursday:

Alone with none but thee my God,
I journey on my way;
What need I fear, when thou art near,
O King of night and day?
More safe am I within thy hand,
Than if a host did round me stand.

My destined time is fixed by thee,
And death does know his hour.
Did warriors strong around me throng,
They could not stay his power;
No walls of stone can man defend
When thou they messenger dost send. Etc.

A good choice of Hymns for Morning Prayer could be taken from those for the Office of Readings, nos 132 to 146.

Note: the Intercessions for Morning Prayer for the Common of Apostles, unlike those for Evening Prayer I and II, are not intercessions.

The point and value of the Divine Office

The above is not meant to belittle the recitation of the Divine Office, but to improve it and remove

monotony. Private prayer is necessary, but community prayer has a special dignity: "Where two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them." The Office is one part of our share in the public and communal prayer of the people of God. It is principally a prayer of praise and supplication, the prayer of the Church with Christ and to Christ, the Eucharist being the centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community.

The Psalms

The Psalms take up most of the Office.

"The Psalter has been justly termed the prayer book of the Church" because of intensive use in the liturgy.

"From many points of view it is not an easy prayer book, because it represents the wide range of Israel's belief and history over some 700 years. But although makes some demands upon those who use it in prayer – demands that can be met by a study of the OT and by an appreciation of God's gradual revelation of himself to Israel – it also remains open to men of all classes and all times. For in these prayers is expressed the basic reactions of man before God – faith, joy, fear, trust, and praise – language no one can fail to understand."

(p. 576, The Jerome Biblical Commentary.)

"The spiritual riches of the Psalter need no commendation. The Psalms were the prayer of the Old Testament in which God inspired the feeling that his children ought to have towards him and the words they ought to use when speaking to him. They were recited by Jesus himself, by the Virgin Mary, the apostles and the early martyrs. The Christian Church has adopted them unchanged for her official prayer. Unchanged: the cries of praise, entreaty and thanksgiving, wrung from the psalmists by events of their own time and by their personal experiences, have a universal note, expressing as they do the attitude every man should have towards God. Unchanged as regards the words, but with a great enrichment of the sense: in the New Covenant, the faithful man praises and thanks God for unveiling the secret of His inmost nature, for redeeming him by the blood of his Son, for filling him with his Spirit; hence each Psalm ends with the Trinitarian doxology: *Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.* The ancient entreaties have become more ardent since the last supper, the cross and the resurrection have taught mankind the infinite quality of the love of God, the universality and gravity of sin, the glory promised to the faithful. The hope sung by the psalmists has been fulfilled, the Messiah has come, he reigns and all nations are summoned to praise him." (The Jerusalem Bible, Darton, Longman and Todd, p. 785.)