

Theology Night

"The Divine Office"

St. Stephen Catholic Church
August 29th, Anno Domini 2023



The Hours of the Divine Office

“It was the distribution of Christian prayer over the various times of the day that gave birth to these “Hours of Prayer,” and among them three groups are to be discerned: (1) the nocturnal group; (2) the group composed of terce, sext, and none; (3) the group comprising prime and compline. Each of these groups has its own date, and its own peculiar origin.” (Pierre Battiffol, The History of the Roman Breviary, 1912., pg. 1).

- Matins
- Lauds
- Prime
- Terce
- Mass *
- Sext
- None
- Vespers
- Compline

History of the Hours

1. Vespers/Matins/Lauds

The nocturnal group has as its first element the “vigil,” which in primitive times was celebrated in the night between Saturday and Sunday... (Battiffol, 1)

“The Lord’s Day” was the commemoration of the Resurrection of Christ, and thus was, as it were, a weekly Easter. Now the Christian festival of Easter had a solemn vigil, employed in the solemn baptism of the catechumens. The idea was entertained that, the night of Holy Saturday before Easter Sunday being that whereon Christ rose from the dead, it would be on such a night that He would reappear in the world, like the destroying angel who had of old, on the night of the first Passover, smitten the first-born of Egypt. On that night of Easter, that night of which the prophet (as men believed) had foretold that it should be as clear as the day (ps. 138.12) - it was meet that none should sleep, but watch and pray till dawn, awaiting the coming of the Lord. Thence came the institution of the Paschal vigil, and the Paschal vigil, in time gave birth to the Sunday vigil. Thus S. Augustine calls the Paschal vigil ‘the mother of all the holy vigils,’ and S. Jerome, following Lactantius, explains the observance of the vigil by the expectation of the return of Christ, and speaks of this explanation as an Apostolic tradition. (p. 1f)

St. Jerome:

“The tradition of the Jews is that Christ will come at midnight, 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 dwellings, and our doorposts were hallowed by the blood of the lamb. Whence also I think that the Apostolic tradition has survived, of not allowing the people to be dismissed before midnight on the vigil of Easter, in expectation of the coming of Christ. But after that hour has passed, all, with confidence of safety, celebrate the festival. Whence the psalmist also said: At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee, because of Thy righteous judgments” (Ps. cxviii. 62). (p. 1., footnote 1).

...in practice, the Sunday vigil began at cock-crow. However, they also consecrated to prayer the beginning of the night, the hour when lamps had to be lighted, called...in Latin, *lucernarium*. The office which was in time to be known as Vespers is in reality the first part of the nocturnal vigil: vespers belong of right to the night (3)

The programme of the vigils comprised the reading of the Holy Scriptures, also prayers addressed to God, and the singing of psalms (3).

The singing also assumed the form of a dialogue. The number of people who knew how to read being small, books being scarce, and the texts of the psalms often difficult, the psalmody was not rendered by all together, but by one clerk, as a solo. He recited the psalm on a musical phrase, sometimes simple, like a recitative, sometimes more ornate. ...Meanwhile, the congregation listened in silence while the reader said or sung the psalm: but the psalm was always concluded with some sort of refrain or acclamation sung by the congregation all together, like the response of a litany. The doxology *Gloria Patri* is an acclamation of this kind.

We are assured by John Cassian that the monastic communities of Egypt, at the end of the fourth century, had remained faithful to the most ancient and severe form of of psalmody. The office, of the evening and of the night alike, consisted of the recitation of twelve psalms. And this number would appear to have been fixed on at a very early date, for the Egyptians loved to assert that it went back to the time of S. Mark, their first bishop, and that it had been revealed by an angel from Heaven (5).

The vigil office, which originally was peculiar to the observance of Sunday, was early introduced into the observance of the festivals of martyrs. Every anniversary of a martyr was observed, like the Lord's Day, with a Eucharistic assembly preceded by a vigil. The antiquity of these anniversaries is attested by a document of the year 155 (cf. The Martyrdom of Polycarp).

The "station days" were added to them at an early date. Just as the Jews fasted 'twice in the week,' so did the Christians. The Didache, at the end of the first century, already mentions these two fasting days. ...In the third century the stations on Wednesday and Friday were a matter of Catholic custom. And every station involved a vigil (8).

Sunday vigils, station vigils, vigils in cemeteries, each comprising a triple office--evening, night, and morning (Battifol 8)

Nowadays, Matins for Sunday reminds us that the three nocturns used to be prayed at the beginning, the middle, and the close of night. The first versicle runs: 'In the evening I think of Thy name, O Lord.' In the second nocturn, 'I rise at midnight to praise Thee.' In the third nocturn, 'I looked for Thee even before the dawn.' (Pius Parsch. *The Breviary Explained*, 1952. p. 81).

Order of Matins:

- Invitatory
- Hymn
- Nocturn (Simple: 1 nocturn-9 psalms, 3 readings; Sunday/Solemn: 3 nocturns-9 psalms, 9 readings).
- Te Deum
- Lauds (5 psalms, chapter, hymn, versicle and response, Benedictus, prayer).

Terce/Sext/None

monazantes and *parthenae* - ascetics and virgins. ...their rule of life imposed on these ascetics and virgins the duty of daily common prayer. They were not to be content with the appointed vigils of the Church, but were to celebrate privately daily vigils. Their life was, in fact, to be a perpetual vigil. ...S. John Chrysostom, speaking of the ascetics of Antioch, writes: "Scarcely has the cock crowed when they arise. Scarcely have they risen when they chant the psalms of David--and with what sweet harmony! ...And so with the Angels--with the Angels, I say,--they sing "O praise the Lord of Heaven," while we men of the world are still asleep, or, it may be, half awake, and even then thinking of nothing but our own miserable affairs. Not until daybreak do they take any repose, and scarcely has the sun appeared when they once more betake themselves to prayer, and perform their morning service of praise." (Battifol, 12).

S. John Chrysostom (goes) on to say that, not only every morning at cock-crow and at the hour of dawn do the ascetics and virgins devote themselves to united psalmody, but yet again, every day, at the third, sixth, and ninth hour. So ancient a custom is it for Christians to consecrate by prayer the times we call Terce, Sext, and None. Christian piety associated the commemoration of Christian mysteries with these three points of time, which divided the day into three states: at the third hour (9 am), the commemoration of the condemnation of the Saviour; at the sixth hour (noon), of His Crucifixion; at the ninth (3 pm), of His death. What was for the faithful of the third century nothing more than a counsel, had become for the ascetics and virgins of the fourth century a rule. They prayed at Terce, and Sext, and None, and they united in psalmody at each of these hours, just as they united at the cock-crowing or at the hour of the lucernarium (12-13).

Prime/Compline

"It was stated by some writers that this Hour was established by St. Clement and should therefore date from almost apostolic times" (Quigley, *The Divine Office: A Study of the Roman Breviary*. 1920. p. 146).

In the meantime the monks of Bethlehem had added one more office to the daily course. The institution of it was not of early date, since John Cassian witnessed its introduction at the time of his stay at Bethlehem, about A.D. 382. Its origin was to the last degree prosaic. At Bethlehem, Cassian tells us, the monks were wont to go and take some repose when the offices of nocturns and lauds were ended...But it came to pass that the monks took advantage of this indulgence to spend the morning in bed, and only aroused themselves when summoned to terce. An end was therefore put to this laxity by the appointment of an office to be said at sunrise, comprising three psalms, and thus similar to the office at the other three day-hours. Such was the origin of prime (Battifol, 27).

The office of vespers, again, did not precisely coincide with the end of the day; for after it came the evening meal, and then bedtime. Could the day of a man of God end otherwise than with prayer? Could the day of a man of God end otherwise than with prayer? Was it not fitting that a religious should commend to God the night, and the rest which night brings with it? "When the night begins," writes S. Basil, "we must ask God to guard our rest from all sin, and from every evil thought: hence it is that we then say the 90th psalm, *Qui habitat in adjutorio altissimi*" (27f).

Summary

A primitive Christian idea, perhaps that of the end of the world and the return of Christ, created the ancient vigil, viz. the evening, night, and early morning office of Sunday. ...The desire of paying honour to God at each of the hours which divided the day produced the offices of terce, sext, and none... The two exercises known as prime and compline originated in the conditions of the coenobitic life.

The Spirituality of the Divine Office

In the sixth century, St. Benedict (c. 480-547) wrote the following in his "little rule for beginners":

The Prophet says: Seven times a day have I praised you (Ps 118[119]: 164). We will fulfill this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. For it was of these hours during the day that he said: Seven times a day have I praised you (Ps 118[119]: 164). Concerning Vigils, the same Prophet says: At midnight I arose to give you praise (Ps 118[119]: 62). Therefore, we should praise our Creator for his just judgments at these times: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline; and let us arise at night to give him praise (Ps 118[119]: 164, 62). (Rule ch. 16)

Benedict refers to the "sacred number of seven." Subsequently, many theologians have contemplated this number and offered their insights concerning the seven Hours of the daily Office. Among other things, John Henry Newman reasoned that praying seven times daily "was a fit remedy of those successive falls which, scripture says, happen to the 'just man' daily" (qtd. in Quigley 4). Similarly he compared the seven hours with the seven days of creation and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Others have connected the seven hours with the scenes of the Passion. One author noted how the "seven canonical hours... bear a striking resemblance to the seven ages of man":

Matins, the night office, typifies the pre-natal stage of life. Lauds, the office of dawn, seems to resemble the beginnings of childhood. Prime recalls to him youth. Terce, recited when the sun is high in the heavens shedding brilliant light, symbolizes early manhood with its strength and glory. Sext typifies mature age. None, recited when the sun is declining, suggests man in his middle age. Vespers reminds all of decrepit age gliding gently down to the grave. Compline, night prayer said before sleep, should remind us of the great night, death. (Quigley 5)

Matins: Rising at night to pray is rooted in the Christian's belief in Christ's parousia and "the longing for the return of the Lord, during the night until dawn" (Parsch 31). This night office, variously referred to as Vigils in the Monastic Office or as Matins in the Breviarium Romanum, was traditionally composed of three to four sets of nocturns and "derived its name from the vigils or night watches of the soldiers, who divided the night, from six o'clock in the evening to six o'clock in the morning, into four watches of three hours each" (Quigley 140). Those who rose at night to pray compared themselves to soldiers in God's spiritual army. They also compared themselves to the wise virgins keeping their lamps alight for the return of the bridegroom, or the faithful servants waiting for the master to return from his wedding (Luke 12:38). St. Isidore commented on the latter: "And if he comes at the second watch, and if at the third watch, and finds them waiting, blessed are those servants" (De officiis ecclesiasticis 1,22 qtd. in Taft 120).

At Lauds, one will commence the day's work. For this reason, the lesson, called the Capitulum in the Breviary, "is short, whilst the lessons of Matins, the night Office, are long, because the day is specially given to toil and the night to contemplation" (Quigley 174).

Prime gets its name, *Primam*, from the fact that it was prayed at the first hour of the Roman day, 6 am (190-191). Prime picks up where Lauds left off. Whereas Lauds is an occasion to praise God for the new day, at Prime one sets out to form a "good intention, or a sort of girding for the day's battles and the day's work (Parsch 34).

Traditionally, it was customary for priests to celebrate Terce solemnly immediately before Holy Mass. For this reason, Terce is sometimes also called the *hora sacra*, or sacred Hour (Quigley 202), being the hour when our Savior was condemned. This event gives a great spiritual significance to celebrating Mass immediately afterward, when our condemned Lord freely offers Himself up to the Father in sacrifice. In relation to the descent of the Holy Spirit, Terce has come to be called the *hora aurea*, or golden Hour, because the Holy Spirit is typified by gold (202). During this first break from the workday, the Church invokes the Holy Spirit who "spiritually invigorates and fortifies us for the day's battles" (Parsch 36).

Sext is not merely an excuse to break from work. As its name signifies, it is a break at the sixth hour, twelve o'clock. It is the middle of the work day. Among the 'seven ages of man', "Sext typifies mature age" (Quigley 5) when a man has reached his full height. Likewise, the sun has reached its height and "the day's struggle is at its height" (Parsch 36). The heat of the day is at its strongest and the "heat of our passions is at its strongest" (36). This is the main theme of the hymn, *Rector potens, verax Deus*, (Powerful Ruler, true God), sung during weeks I and III, in which the Church prays to God to *Extingue flammam litium, aufer calorem noxium*, (Extinguish the flames of debates, remove the heat of contentions). At this hour Christ hung on the Cross and "hell unlash(e)d all its might against Him" (36). Pondering the Lord's passion and battling one's own passions, one prays in this hymn that God will *Confer salutem corporum Veramque pacem cordium* (Confer health of body and true peace of heart).

The final break during the workday calls the Christian to pray at the ninth hour of the Roman day, three o'clock, at which time "Peter and John went up into the Temple at the ninth hour of prayer" (Acts 3:1), and healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate.

The primary theme for None is its association with the Lord on the cross giving up His spirit. Consequently, as the sun begins its gradual descent, suggesting "man in his middle age" (Quigley 5), the Christian prays for perseverance, looking towards the evening of life and meditating on the last things (Parsch 37). Reflecting back on Jesus' death, and "mindful of the Good Thief... we pray that our death may be a holy one" (Connelly 29).

Vesper is the Latin word for the evening star. It is thus known not so much as an evening hour, but as a "sunset hour" (Quigley 209) It thus marks the beginning of the first watch of the night, and the prayer of Vespers was once classed as a night one --St. Benedict being the first to place it among the day Hours. This change was one of classification and did not change the essential character of Vespers. Lauds, after all, is a morning hour and yet, historically and chorally, it is the conclusion of the night office. In the same way Vespers could be considered either as the prayer which finished the day or the one which began the night. (Connelly 32-33)

Compline is the completion of the day, but it belongs to the night. As one retires to bed, a sign of the final age in the 'seven ages of man', "Compline, night prayer said before sleep, should remind us of the great night, death (Quigley 5). While both Vespers and Compline contemplate the end of earthly life, Compline "differs from Vespers by being rather the personal prayer of the sinful soul seeking to return to rest and peace with God" (Parsch 38).

The Hymns of the Divine Office

St. Gregory the Great

Among the many hymns in the Divine Office, the Vespers hymns of St. Gregory the Great stand out as a set for each day of the week, corresponding to the six days of Creation. He wrote no hymn for Saturday Vespers, because in the book of Genesis, the seventh day (the Sabbath) never comes to an end.

"The opening verses give, in order, the work of each day of creation and, by their use at Vespers, suggest God looking back over each day's work and 'seeing that it was good'. Man also, as the Psalmist says, goes out each day to his work and labours until evening, Ps. 103.23. But when he comes to examine the day's work and sees its imperfections, he cannot, as God did, delight in it; moreover night and darkness, symbols of sin, are near at hand. He therefore turns to God for forgiveness and for help, and his aspirations are put into words in the last part of the hymns--this part being in each case a spiritual application of the opening verses....the Vesper hymns for Sunday to Friday form a series quite unlike those for Matins and Lauds, as they have unity of author and subject as well as unity of purpose and style." (Connelly. Hymns of the Roman Liturgy. pp.34-35)

Dominica: The First Day

First, let us listen to the beginning of Genesis:

The Holy Bible: In the beginning God created heaven, and earth. And the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved over the waters. And God said: Be light made. And light was made. And God saw the light that it was good; and he divided the light from the darkness. And he called the light Day, and the darkness Night. And there was evening and morning one day. (Gen. 1:1-5)

Now, let us look at the hymn that St. Gregory wrote for the first day of the week: *Lucis Creator optime*.

O blest Creator of the light,
Who mak'st the day with radiance bright,
And o'er the forming world didst call
The light from chaos first of all;

Whose wisdom joined in meet array
The morn and eve, and named them day:
Night comes with all its darkling fears;
Regard thy people's prayers and tears.

Lest, sunk in sin, and whelm'd with strife,
They lose the gift of endless life;

While thinking but the thoughts of time,
They weave new chains of woe and crime.

But grant them grace that they may strain
The heav'nly gate and prize to gain:
Each harmful lure aside to cast,
And purge away each error past.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and Thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. John M. Neale)

Feria secunda: the Second Day (Monday)

The Holy Bible: And God said: Let there be a firmament made amidst the waters: and let it divide the waters that were under the firmament, from those that were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and morning were the second day (Gen. 1:6-8).

And St. Gregory responded by writing this for Vespers of the Second Day: Immense caeli Conditor

O boundless Wisdom, God most high,
O Maker of the earth and sky,
Who bid'st the parted waters flow
In heav'n above, on earth below.

The streams on earth, the clouds in heav'n,
By thee their ordered bounds were giv'n,
Lest 'neath the untempered fires of day
The parchèd soil should waste away.

E'en so on us who seek Thy face
Pour forth the waters of Thy grace;
Renew the fount of life within,
And quench the wasting fires of sin.

Let faith discern the eternal Light
Beyond the darkness of the night,
And through the mists of falsehood see
The path of truth revealed by Thee.

O Father, that we ask be done
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. Gabriel Gillett)

Feria Tertia: The Third Day (Tuesday)

The Holy Bible: God also said: Let the waters that are under the heaven, be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. And so it was done. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters, he called Seas. And God saw that it was good. And he said: Let the earth bring forth the green herb, and such as may seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, which may have seed in itself upon the earth. And it was so done. And the earth brought forth the green herb, and such as yieldeth seed according to its kind, and the tree that beareth fruit, having seed each one according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the third day. (Gen. 1:9-13)

And Pope St. Gregory responded by writing this hymn for Vespers of the Third Day, Tuesday: *Telluris ingens Conditor*

Earth's mighty Maker, whose command
Raised from the sea the solid land,
And drove each bill'wy heap away,
And bade the earth stand firm for aye:

That so, with flow'rs of golden hue,
The seeds of each it might renew;
And fruit trees bearing fruit might yield--
And pleasant pasture of the field;

Our spirit's ranking wounds efface
With dewy freshness of thy grace:
That grief might cleanse each deed of ill,
And o'er each lust may triumph still.

Let every soul thy law obey,
And keep from every evil way;
Rejoice each promised good to win
And flee from every mortal sin.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. Anonymous)

Feria Quarta: The Fourth Day (Wednesday)

The Holy Bible: And God said: Let there be lights made in the firmament of heaven, to divide the day and the night, and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days and years: To shine in the firmament of heaven, and to give light upon the earth. And it was so done. And God made two great lights: a greater light to rule the day: and a lesser light to rule the night: and the stars. And he set them in the firmament of heaven to shine upon the earth. And to rule the day and the night, and to divide the

light and the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day. (Gen. 1: 14-19)

And Saint Gregory responded by writing this Vespers hymn for the Fourth Day, Wednesday: Caeli Deus sanctissime

O God, whose Hand has spread the sky
And all its shining hosts on high,
And painting it with fiery light,
Made it so beauteous and so bright:

Who, on the fourth day, did reveal
The sun's enkindled flaming wheel,
Did set the seasons through the year
The well remembered signs declare:

That each in its appointed way
Might separate the night from day,
And of the seasons through the year
The well remembered signs declare:

Illuminate our hearts within,
And cleanse our minds from stain of sin;
Unburdened of our guilty load
May we unfettered serve our God.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. John M. Neale)

Feria Quinta: The Fifth Day (Thursday)

The Holy Bible: God also said: Let the waters bring forth the creeping creature having life, and the fowl that may fly over the earth under the firmament of heaven. And God created the great whales, and every living and moving creature, which the waters brought forth, according to their kinds, and every winged fowl according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. And he blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the waters of the sea; and let the birds be multiplied upon the earth. And the evening and the morning were the fifth day. (Gen. 1:20-23)

St. Gregory responded likewise with this Vespers hymn for the Fifth Day, Thursday: Magnae Deus potentiae

Almighty God, whose will supreme
Made ocean's flood with life to teem;
Part in the firmament to fly,

And part in ocean depths to lie:

Appointing fishes in the sea,
And fowls in open air to be;
That each, by origin the same,
Its separate dwelling place might claim:

Grant that thy servants by the tide
Of Blood and Water purified
No guilty fall from Thee may know,
Nor death eternal undergo.

Let non despair through sin's distress,
Be none puffed up with boastfulness;
That contrite hearts be not dismayed,
Nor haughty souls in ruin laid.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. William John Courthope)

Feria Sexta: The Sixth Day (Friday)

The Holy Bible: And God said: Let the earth bring forth the living creature in its kind, cattle and creeping things, and beasts of the earth, according to their kinds. And it was so done. And God made the beasts of the earth according to the kinds, and cattle, and every thing that creepeth on the earth after its kind. And God saw that it was good. And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness; and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth. And God created man to his own image; to the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them. And God blessed them, saying: Increase and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it, and rule over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and all living creatures that move upon the earth. And God said: Behold I have given you every herb bearing seed upon the earth, and all trees that have in themselves seed of their own kind, to be your meat: And to all beasts of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to all that move upon the earth, and wherein there is life, that they may have to feed upon. And it was so done. And God saw all the things that he had made, and they were very good. And the evening and morning were the sixth day. (Gen. 1:24-31)

St. Gregory writes this hymn for the sixth day at Vespers: *Plasmator hominis, Deus*

Maker of men, who from thy throne
Dost order all things, God alone;
By whose decree the teeming earth
To reptile and to beast give birth

The mighty forms that fill the land,
Instinct with life at thy command,
Are giv'n subdued to humankind
For service in their rank assigned.

From all thy servants drive away
What e'er of thought impure today
Has been with open action mixed
Or has the erring heart transfixed.

In heav'n thine endless joys bestow,
And grant thy gifts of grace below;
From chains of strife our souls release,
Bind fast the gentle bands of peace.

O Father, that we ask be done,
Through Jesus Christ, thine only Son;
Who, with the Holy Ghost and thee,
Dost live and reign eternally. Amen. (Trans. William John Courthope)

Thus ends the six days of creation and the six days of Vespers.

Sabbato: The Seventh Day (Saturday)

The Holy Bible: So the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the furniture of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made: and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. And he blessed the seventh day and sanctified it: because in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.

As St. Bonaventure points out, the seventh day has no evening and so Pope St. Gregory the Great did not compose a Vespers hymn for the seventh day which is the Sabbath. If God refrained from creating on the seventh day, so Pope St. Gregory would likewise refrain from creating a hymn for the seventh day. Following suit, the Roman liturgy to this day does not observe Vespers for the seventh day. Rather, it is first Vespers for the First Day which is honored by the praying of Vespers twice because the day emerged from night and ended with night.