

## ***Keeping Time with God: Evening Prayer***

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The evening office has three names: evening prayer, vespers, and (because it is frequently sung) evensong. It is the most fully developed of the ancient offices, with the possible exception of a vigil prior to a festival or holy day. For our Jewish forebearers in the faith and hence the early Christian church, a day began at dusk. The Daily Office thus begins with evening prayer, and the week begins with Saturday evening, not Sunday morning.

Even before Christian prayer used a service of light, rituals of lighting the evening lights was already present in the culture. It was necessary, of course, in order to see, and it was not as simple as flipping a switch. Light was received gratefully, and greeted "Hail, good light!" or "Hail, friendly light!" Taft speaks of the entrance of the light as "a baptized pagan rite"<sup>1</sup> but it is clear that even before there was a formal service, family piety in Christian homes would greet the evening lamp with praise for Christ, the light of the world.

By the seventh century in Spain, the light ritual was called the "oblation of light" and involved elevating a lighted candle before the altar. This was accompanied by a proclamation and response which come amazingly close to the dialogue for the Entrance of the Light we use today: "Light and peace and Jesus Christ!" "Thanks be to God!"<sup>2</sup>

The *Phos hilaron* or evening hymn was also known in ancient times as a *eucharistia*, a thanksgiving for the light. Basil already knew it as an ancient part of the tradition in the fourth century: "We cannot say who was the father of the words of the thanksgiving for the light," he writes, "but the people utter the ancient formula, and . . . were never thought impious by anyone."<sup>3</sup> The form used in the Daily Office of the Order of Saint Luke was adapted by Brother Timothy Crouch and is as beautiful and faithful to the ancient text as can be found.

The resonance between the service of light and baptism is often overlooked. For those who have celebrated an Easter Vigil, lighting the vespers candle resonates with the lighting of the paschal candle at the first service of Easter. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the service of light in the Easter vigil derives from the lucernarium of vespers, not as we might suppose the other way around.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the early Church, baptism was called "phôtismos" or "phôtisma," that is, "illumination" and those

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<sup>1</sup> □ Robert Taft, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East of West: The Origins of the Divine Office and Its Meaning for Today* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> Taft, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Holy Spirit* 29 (73).

<sup>4</sup> Taft, p. 37.

to be baptized were known as the "illuminandi."<sup>5</sup> At the lighting of the vesper light, we do well to remember our baptism and be thankful! Since the time of the ancient church, there has also been an eschatological dimension here, for we are reminded of the Johannine vision of the Lamb as the eternal lamp of the heavenly city, the sun that never sets.<sup>6</sup>

On Saturday and Sunday evenings and on the evening before and of a holy day or feast of the Church, we make those meanings explicit with a prayer of thanksgiving for the light. The form used in the Ordinary comes from a volume of Daily Prayer edited by Joyce Anne Zimmerman:

Blessed are you, Sovereign God, our light and our life;  
to you be glory and praise forever!  
When we turned away to darkness and chaos,  
like a mother you would not forsake us.  
You cried out like a woman in labor  
and rejoiced to bring forth a new people.  
Your living Word brings light out of darkness  
and daily your Spirit renews the face of the earth,  
bending our wills to the gentle rule of your love.

[CCP]

All thanks and praise to you,  
Most holy and blessed Trinity,  
One God, now and forever. **Amen.**

By the fourth century, vespers was a time to "review and conclude the day, thanking God for graces received, begging pardon for faults committed, and requesting protection from sin and danger throughout the coming night . . . [it] continued to share with the newer compline its original purpose as a service of thanksgiving, examination of conscience, and forgiveness, . . . [incorporating] such classic cathedral elements as the lucernarium with hymn, Psalm 140 with incense, and intercessions."<sup>7</sup>

Psalm 141 was also a "stated psalm" for the opening of vespers. With its antiphon ("My prayers rise like incense; my hands like an evening sacrifice"), it seems particularly fitting for vespers. I have called the forms we use in the Lukan Daily Office the "Evening Prayer Canticle" because we do not use the entire psalm. The chant form which appears on the inside front cover of the Daily Office volumes is a translation by Arlo D. Duba, formerly Dean and Professor of Worship at Dubuque Theological

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<sup>5</sup> Taft, pp. 350-351.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Tertullian, *Apology* 39:18 and *Apostolic Tradition* 25.

<sup>7</sup> Taft, p. 90.

Seminary. He has also set the antiphon to music and it appears in The United Methodist Hymnal at the bottom of p. 850 in connection with another psalm.

Another setting of this canticle is a metrical form sent to me by Sister Sarah Flynn early in process. I had difficulty finding the right tune, but with some minor adjusting, discovered it would fit ST. PETERSBURG (UMH 153) which is the recommended tune in the Ordinary. Most often, however, I sing it to SELENA ("O Love Divine, What Hast Thou Done," UMH 287. I seek to live into the words Sister Sarah gave me, especially that petition: "Help me accept rebuke as grace!"

It is interesting to note that somehow the Daily Office escaped the great medieval and reformation fixation on guilt. While bits of confession may appear here and there in the other offices, it is only in Vespers and Compline that Confession and Pardon are an essential part of the office. This is a spiritually healthy approach. It is in the evening, as we reflect on the past day, that we must be honest before God. The prayers of confession in the Lukan Daily Office come from many sources both traditional and contemporary.

As in the morning office, the psalter and the Gloria form an important part of our prayer. After hearing and reflecting on Scripture, we sing a form of the Canticle of Mary.

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There is a provision for optional "Readings for Meditation and Reflection" at this point. Traditionally it is where something written by or about the saints would be read. This is also the point at which a homily may be preached.

There are some who are convinced that preaching is out of place in the Daily Office; it is primarily a service of prayer and contemplation. There is much to be said for such an approach, especially in a Protestant religious culture which placed the sermon (and rarely a brief one at that) as the most important element in worship. Yet we must recognize that the Church survived homilies in connection with Vigils, Morning and Evening Prayer, both in the early church<sup>8</sup> and in Anglican practice where "Morning Prayer with Sermon" was a prevalent pattern. A homily can replace or supplement a reading to the benefit of the gathered community, providing the preacher knows that the preaching is to serve the office and our capacity to pray it and not that the office exists for the sake of the sermon, and one supposes, the preacher! Brevity and relevance to the office determine whether a homily is appropriate or not.

We continue with the prayers, with special attention at vespers to intercessions. Brother Timothy Crouch has gifted us with his adaptation of "The Collect for Peace" from the

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<sup>8</sup> e.g. Ambrose (c. 334-379), *Letter 20:13-25*; Augustine (387-430), *De curia rp mortuis gerenda* 5 (7); St. Caesarius of Arles (c. 503-542), *Sermon 76:3, 86:5, and 196.2.*

eighth century Gelasian Sacramentary, and "The Collect for Aid Against Perils" from the sixth century Mozarabic Sacramentary. There are prayers of special intention, including collects of commemoration on saint's days and other holy days or from Brother Clif Guthrie's volume *For All the Saints*, intercessions for the Order and a collect for the Order (found on the back cover of the Daily Office volumes).

After a concluding collect (which may come from either traditional or contemporary sources), we pray the Lord's Prayer and/or the Spirit Prayer, sing or read a final hymn and share in the dismissal and blessing or ascription of praise which always concludes with the dialogue: "Let us bless the Lord." "Thanks be to God."

On the evening before or the evening of a holy day or festival, a gathered community may use three lessons, sing as much of the office as possible, and add other appropriate elements to the office. In such circumstances, we speak of "Solemn Vespers." Here the word "solemn" does not mean gloomy or dismal, the connotation it tends to have today. Rather, to use words from *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, it means "full," "sumptuous," "splendid," "awe-inspiring," "deeply earnest." Thus, we used to hear of "the solemnization of matrimony." The synonym of "solemnize" is "celebration," so perhaps we would communicate more clearly if we spoke of such services as "The Celebration of Vespers"--but that gets us into trouble because "celebration" has come to be associated with happy joy, and that is not quite right either. So we have opted to keep the historic terminology and speak of "solemn vespers" on such occasions.

In the third century Cyprian wrote: "At sunset and the passing of the day it is necessary to pray. For since Christ is the true sun and the true day, when we pray and ask, as the sun and the day of the world recede, that the light may come upon us again, we pray for the coming of Christ, which provides us with the grace of eternal light."<sup>9</sup> In the twenty-first century, we still seek that grace and join with Cyprian in the evening prayer of the Church.

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<sup>9</sup> For the complete context, see chapters 34-36 of Cyprian's *On the Lord's Prayer*.