

The Diurnal Offices and Compline

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People of the New Testament and the early church thought of daytime as involving twelve hours and these twelve hours were divided into groups of three with the third, sixth and ninth hours being the usual points of reference. This would not have been a matter of "clock time" but rather a reference to mid-morning, noon, and mid-afternoon.

When I worked in the hayfields of Kansas as a youth, we would count on a mid-morning and mid-afternoon "lunch" being brought to the field, and to returning to the farmhouse at mid-day for dinner. It was nourishment that sustained us in the presence of the prairie's searing sun and hot wind. So it is that these became times for the nourishment of prayer, based in the older Jewish times for prayer. Cyprian in the third century found in them "a sacrament of the Trinity."¹ We are more likely to find in them a reminder that we must pray always.

In the pre-Constantinian era, the day offices recalled the passion in Mark 15.² At the third hour, Jesus was nailed to the tree; at the sixth hour, darkness fell; at the ninth hour, Jesus died. The third hour was also a memorial of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.³ These were times for private prayer, as they will usually be for us, and it was not until the fourth century that they became corporate monastic offices.

These "little offices" are intentionally brief and simple, capable of either being "shoe-horned" into a busy day, or prayed in a quiet and unhurried setting. A "little chapter" is provided--only a few verses of scripture on which to center our minds and hearts. A concluding prayer focuses our thoughts on the meaning of the office for the lives we lead. These offices are diaconal in nature, bridges between the Church and the world, between worship and work so that "those who wait on the Lord for help will find their strength renewed." Day by day, O Lord, "hear our prayer and let our cry come to You."⁴

Compline

The word "Compline" comes from the same Latin root as our word "complete." This is the service which closes the day as we understand it, the last liturgical prayer of the day, unless there is a Vigil. This is the Church's bedtime prayer. The Armenian office of the Christian East speaks of "the hour of peace" and "the hour of rest."⁵ The service should end in silence, with persons leaving gradually only as they are ready, when

¹ Taft, p. 19.

² Taft, p. 28.

³ Taft, p. 28.

⁴ From the Mid-Day Office, pp. 21-22 of the Ordinary of the OSL Daily Office volumes.

⁵ Taft, p. 220.

peace and rest have overwhelmed the troubles and concerns of this life, or if that is impossible, when allow the Saviour to bear them with us, thus finding rest for our souls.

No doubt, prayer before going to sleep began as a personal or family devotional practice, and it was in the monastic community that gathering to share those prayers in common grew into an office all its own, which it had become by the time Basil lists it among his seven offices in the fourth century.

It would have been prayed in the dark, or very nearly in the dark at least. Its contents were thus extremely stable so they could be easily memorized and prayed without anyone needing to read a book. While contemporary culture allows us additional flexibility in this regard, the basic components of this office remain the same throughout the year.

The Call to Prayer introduces us to the twin themes of the office "The Lord almighty grant us a restful night and peace at the last." In order to have a restful night, we will need to have confessed our sins and received the assurance of forgiveness for them. But we also pray for "peace at the last." For the early Christians and even more so, for the medieval mind, sleep was a rehearsal of death. Compline helps us prepare for death, both the death of baptism and physical death. In both cases, death does not have the last word. The last word is God's and that word is "resurrection." Compline, then is a quiet service of hope and trust, in which we give ourselves into God's hands.

We sing a night hymn. From Advent through Epiphany, the Order of Saint Luke uses the ninth century Latin text "Creator of the stars of night"--not the abbreviated form found in most hymnals, but the full text where the Advent/Christmas theme is unmistakable. During the Great Fifty Days, the order lists the nineteenth century "Savior, breathe an evening blessing" because of the plea in its last stanza: "Blessed Spirit, brooding o'er us, chase the darkness of our night, til the perfect day before us breaks in everlasting light." In Ordinary Time during the summer and fall, the sixteenth century text "Now, God be with us for the night is closing" is used.

For the Confession and Assurance, I turned to *The New Zealand Prayer Book*. The text needed to be one which would wear well season after season, year after year. In every season of the liturgical year, different aspects of this profound prayer are broken open for me. I am still praying my way into it.

Three psalms are provided, of which one or more may be used. A brief passage of scripture is suggested (a "little chapter" as the tradition terms it), and I'm convinced that a passage of more than a few verses does not work well here.

We introduce the time of prayer with the Kyrie, which is not to be understood as a prayer of confession. Mercy includes forgiveness but much more than that. Here we pray for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to come upon us.

Except during Advent through the Baptism of our Lord, we turn again to *The New Zealand Prayer Book* for a "Prayer for the Spirit's Presence" and then to the "Prayer for the Night" adapted from the Roman Breviary in our own *Book of Offices and Services*.

After praying the Lord's Prayer, we sing a stated hymn (the same in every season), a hymn most commonly used in non-Roman resident communities. These words by Reginald Heber are themselves a night prayer which leads us into the commendation adapted from the historic Sarum Breviary. They are words of great depth and comfort:

In peace we will lie down and sleep.

In the Lord alone we safely rest.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping,
**that awake we may watch with Christ,
and asleep we may rest in peace.**

May the divine help remain with us always.

And with those who are absent from us.

- *silence* -

Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit,
**For you have redeemed me, O Lord,
O God of Truth.**

There we have the themes of Compline brought into dynamic relationship: trust, hope, redemption, the need for guidance in waking and guarding in sleeping, our need for help, our preparation for death as we join our prayer with the prayer of Jesus on the cross: "Into your hands I commend my spirit."

That leads us to the *Nunc Dimittis*, the Canticle of Simeon, which is not only the evangelical canticle sung at Compline from very early on, but also the words which John Calvin thought should be used after every celebration of the Lord's Supper. And, as I can attest from standing beside my father's deathbed, they speak profoundly of our passover from death to life eternal. In the going forth, a simple Trinitarian blessing calls us to respond, as in the other offices: "Thanks be to God!"

Traditionally, this office ends in silence. In a retreat setting or a resident religious community, it can introduce the Great Silence broken only by the next office.

