

The Vigil and the Te Deum

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The Vigil Office joins Morning and Evening Prayer as having been both a “people’s” or “cathedral” office and a part of the monastic tradition. Even a brief look at the first six centuries makes clear that “vigil” is a term used for not one, but for several kinds of night offices (Robert Taft identifies at least five types), distinguished by frequency or time of observance, even though the structure remains much the same.¹ Without examining all the variations, let us note the following which are all part of the Lukan Office:

1. A midnight office.
2. An all-night vigil.
3. A “resurrection vigil” on the eve before the Lord’s Day.
4. A vigil in connection with a holy day.

1. A mid-night office.

By the fourth century, the Cappadocian monastics had a midnight vigil office.² The pre-Constantinian church related night prayer to the watch of the virgins awaiting the coming of the bridegroom, as well as the unceasing praise of the angels which we will share.³ In addition, a text (often attributed to Hippolytus) reads:

For the elders who gave us the tradition taught us that at that hour all creation is still for a moment, to praise the Lord; stars, trees, waters stop for an instant, and all the host of angels . . . praise God with the souls of the righteous in that hour. That is why believers should take good care to pray at this hour. Bearing witness to this, the Lord says thus, “Lo, about midnight a shout was made . . . saying Lo, the bridegroom comes; rise to meet him.”⁴

These themes (the praise of all creation and eschatological expectation) are particularly transparent when the Vigil is observed as a midnight office.

Especially in a retreat setting, I have experienced great power when the community observes silence at the end of Compline, comes together from places of rest in order to pray and praise at midnight, and then returns to bed, keeping silence until in Morning Prayer we pray: “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” As a mid-night office in its own right, it completes the full round of the seven offices. The form for this use is found in the Ordinary of any of the Daily Office volumes of the Order of Saint Luke.

¹ 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. 165.

² Taft, p. 166.

³ Taft, pp. 29-29.

⁴ as quoted in Taft, p. 24.

2. *An all-night vigil.*

Cassian describes a monastic all-night vigil in Bethlehem on Fridays in commemoration of the passion, beginning with vespers.⁵ But it is with Ambrose of Milan that all-night vigils became a people's office. In Holy Week of 385 A.D. the Empress Justina wanted the basilica for the use of the Arians. When Ambrose refused, imperial troops kept Ambrose and his congregation confined for three days. Paulinus writes that "it was in this time that antiphons, hymns and vigils first began to be celebrated in the Church of Milan . . . [a practice] "that remains to this day not only in that Church but indeed throughout almost all the provinces of the West."⁶ Sometimes this all-night vigil was broken up into little night offices (akin to the little diurnal offices) called "nocturns."

An all-night vigil, whether kept by the whole community or sequentially by its members, can embody the same basic themes as the midnight office. The meaning and significance of the other two forms are based on these first two, and it is beneficial to our understanding of the Vigil to have some experience of it either as a mid-night office or an all-night vigil.

3. *A "resurrection vigil" on the eve before the Lord's Day.*

By the fourth century, as Egeria and the *Apostolic Constitutions* report, both Jerusalem and Antioch had a weekly resurrection vigil as a "people's office" before the Lord's Day.⁷ These "pre-Eucharistic" vigils consisted of vespers extended by the use of multiple lections, responsories and prayers, with particular emphasis on the readings from Scripture.⁸

The clearest appropriation of the resurrection vigil in the Lukan Daily Office is based on the work of Brother John Fahey.⁹ There is also a taste of the resurrection vigil in Advent and Ordinary Time where Evening Prayer includes a "Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Light" for use on Saturday and Sunday evenings, and in Lent where a Saturday Evening Vigil is provided. The Lord's Day deserves special attention in the Daily Office, and we do well to remind ourselves of the resurrection vigils of the early church as we pray.

⁵ Cassian, *Institutes*, III, 4:2 and 8-9.

⁶ Paulinus, *Life of Ambrose* 13. See Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 14, 43.

⁷ Taft, p. 167, 189.

⁸ Taft, p. 189.

⁹ See the "Vigil for Saturday Evening (replacing Evening Prayer and Compline" of *The Daily Office: A Book of Hours for Daily Prayer*), Volume Three, pages 28ff. While it is particularly appropriate for The Great Fifty Days, I would have included it in the Ordinary Time volumes if it had been available when those were published. I encourage you to photocopy it from Volume Three and use it during those seasons.

4. *A vigil in connection with a holy day.*

A “baptismal vigil,” originating in the Easter Vigil, came to be celebrated on the eve of Christmas, Epiphany and Pentecost when those became occasions for baptism. This vigil was also an extension of vespers, including the lucernarium (light ritual) and numerous Scripture lections read in the nave while baptizing was taking place in a separate baptistry.¹⁰ From these great festival vigils have come the practice of preparing for a significant holy day with a vigil.

The Daily Office of the Order of Saint Luke provides Vigils for:

- Christmas Eve
- Epiphany Eve
- Ash Wednesday Eve
- Holy Thursday
- Good Friday
- Easter (The Great Paschal Vigil)
- Ascension Eve
- Pentecost Eve
- Trinity Sunday Eve
- Eve of Thanksgiving for the Holy Eucharist
- Eve of the Feast of Saint Luke
- Eve of All Saints

Whereas in the third century *Apostolic Tradition*, morning and evening prayer have a paschal orientation, symbolic of the dying and rising of Christ, the night hours have an eschatological perspective, looking to the parousia and the resurrection of the dead.¹¹ Cyprian, writing around 250 CE writes:

So let us who are always in Christ, that is, in the light, not cease praying even at night. This is how the widow Anna, always praying and keeping vigil, persevered in deserving well of God, as is written in the gospel: “She did not leave the temple, serving with fasting and prayers night and day” (Luke 2:37) . . . Let us not be hindered by the darkness which we have escaped, let there be no loss of prayers in the night hours.¹²

The structure of the Vigil is like an accordion; it can be longer or shorter depending on the occasion. It can last all night, going from Vespers to Morning Prayer. It can be an elongated evening office replacing Vespers or Vespers and Compline. It can be an independent late night or midnight office.

¹⁰ Taft, p. 189

¹¹ Taft, p. 25.

¹² *The Lord's Prayer*, chapter 36.

If Evening Prayer has not been observed, the office begins with the Service of Light and the Cantic of Praise to God. The heart of the office is from three to nine readings from scripture (most frequently in the Lukan office, there are seven readings). In a fully developed vigil, after each lesson is read, a period of silence is kept, a psalm and or a hymn sung in response, and a brief prayer or collect prayed. In the all-night vigils developed by Ambrose, there was even preaching along the way. Music will add much to this pattern, even if it is only a stanza or two after each reading. It is absolutely essential that this part of the office not be hurried. There must be time to hear, to reflect, to absorb. An extended time of silence after each reading is not optional, nor should it be prefatory

The last reading calls forth the praise of the church in the *Te Deum Laudamus*, which for me is the high point of the office. Following a time of prayer or the use of the Great Litany, the concluding prayers place us within the community of all the saints.

In the middle ages, the *Te Deum Laudamus* was attributed to saints Ambrose and Augustine, along with the legend that it was improvised spontaneously and antiphonally by the two at the time of Augustine's baptism.¹³ While that claim remains historically unsubstantiated, I can easily imagine the two of them, both gifted in the use of language and filled with the Holy Spirit, either composing the text on the spot or improvising on an earlier text. Other sources attribute the text to a fourth century Bishop, Niceat (or Nicetas) of Remesiana. That is the attribution we list for Brother Timothy's adaptation of this cantic for the Lukan office.

A detailed and thorough study by Kähler concludes that the *Te Deum* originated before the middle of the fourth century as the preface, *Sanctus*, and post-sanctus prayer of an old Latin mass of the Easter Vigil which was, of course, a baptismal mass.¹⁴ Without mentioning any author or source, a number of early texts cite it only as the "Hymn in Honor of the Holy Trinity"¹⁵ and that is the title given to it in *The United Methodist Hymnal* where it also appears in metrical form as "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name"¹⁶

St. Benedict directed its use at the Vigil, with special reference to Sundays and festivals, a practice followed by both the Roman and Sarum Breviaries, except that it was to be suppressed during Advent and Lent. The 1549 Prayer Book appoints it to be used "daily throughout the year except in Lent." In 1552 that exception was removed, but common practice for most communities of prayer is to "fast" from its use during Lent.¹⁷ Thus, in the Lukan office the *Te Deum Laudamus* is the office cantic for vigils throughout the year, except for (1) Christmas when the *Gloria in excelsis* is used in its place, and (2)

¹³ *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), v. 18, p. 641.

¹⁴ See E. Kähler, *Studien zum Te Deum* (Gottingen, 1958), cited in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), v. 18, p. 641.

¹⁵ *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), v. 13, p. 954

¹⁶ See number 79 and 80.

¹⁷ W. K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London: SPCK, 1932)

Lent when the *De Profundis* based on Psalm 130 (also called "The Canticle of Redemption") is used.

In the *Te Deum Laudamus*, the inner meaning of the Vigil office is made clear. In this office, the prayer of the Church through all times and places is joined with the praise of earth and all stars, as well as the heavenly host:¹⁸

" . . . we praise you . . . we acclaim you . . . all creation worships you."

"To you all angels, all the powers of heaven . . . sing in endless praise."

The opening lines of this "preface" move us to the great *Sanctus* of the seventh and eighth lines in words which resonate with our Eucharistic feasts:

"Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory."

Then, lest we assume that only those of this particular time and place are the Church, we affirm the praise of "the glorious company of the apostles, the noble fellowship of the prophets, and the white robed army of martyrs" and "the holy Church throughout the world" before breaking into a great Trinitarian doxology.

As the Great Thanksgivings we pray at celebrations of the Eucharist move to a focus on the person and work of Christ following the *Sanctus*, so the *Te Deum* moves to a celebration of the paschal mystery, pointing to incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, coming judgment, and final consummation, but always in terms of our participation in them:

"When you came in flesh to set us free, you did not shun the Virgin's womb.

You overcame the sting of death, and opened heaven to all believers.

You are seated at God's right hand in glory;

we believe that you will come to be our judge.

Come then Lord, and help your people,

bought with the price of your own blood,

And bring us with your saints to glory everlasting."

This invocation for God's help with its eschatological perspective may have concluded the ancient canticle. In the Daily Office for the Order of Saint Luke, we have pointed it for singing only up to this point to underscore that fact. The prayers that follow were probably originally the *capitellum*, that is an antiphon (usually from a psalm) used at the conclusion of a canticle. In fact a whole series of these versicles and responses from the psalms have been appended to the *Te Deum*. Since they were always sung with it they came to be thought of as a part of the canticle itself.¹⁹ We honor both the ancient form of the canticle (by pointing it for singing) and the tradition that included these prayers at its conclusion (providing for them to be spoken). They serve as a summary of all the prayers of the people we lift up.

¹⁸ On the three parts of this canticle, see Matthew Britt, *The Hymns of the Breviary and Missal* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922), pp. 46ff. *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), v. 13, p. 954, and *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* cited above.

¹⁹ Clarke, pp. 273-274.

For me, the *Te Deum* is to the Daily Office what the Easter Vigil is to the sacramental life of the Church: a glorious summary that contains the heart and soul of our daily prayer, not in some minimalist and truncated form, but uniting us with all creation, with all the Church, and with all the voices of heaven in a great hymn of praise to the Triune God.

Such praise is not something we can rush into, however. Its mystery may be out of sight, but it is not beyond our sensing it. The monastic pattern is wise: the Vigil is preceded and succeeded by a great silence in which we are quiet before God in order that we may hear the music of the spheres, the song of the angels, and the hymn of Church praising God in the depths of our souls echoing to the heights of heaven.

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