

Preface

The Church has extended an invitation to all people to share each day in its magnificent prayer, the *Liturgy of the Hours*. In earlier ages this prayer had the title of the *Divine Office* and constituted a “duty” (*officium*) to be fulfilled by those under religious vows. In our own time this prayer, made available in many languages, has become a privilege in which all can share.

Yet the *Liturgy of the Hours* is not an easy form of prayer to adopt. Its structure is complicated. Its format is not quickly or easily understood. At first we need a guide in order to understand the sections of the *Hours*. Mastery of the format, however, comes after a certain time and we can with some sense of triumph realize that we can “say” the *Hours*. “Say,” yes. On the one hand we can expertly flip to the required sections. We can confidently face even a “5-ribbon” day. We can join enthusiastically with others in a community recitation of the *Hours*.

“Praying” the *Hours*, on the other hand, may be quite a different experience. Most who take up the invitation to share in the *Hours* will very likely say them in private. For people in this situation the *Hours* ideally will enhance their prayer life. There can be, however, a danger of rote repetition in the private recitation of the *Hours*, if carried on faithfully year after year. The *Hours* may come to be more a duty than a source of inspiration. Completion of the *Hours* may seem to be all that is required and to be somehow in itself meritorious. Sometimes too the mind may wander; the heart may be far otherwise engaged. The will may bring about the reading of the words but may not in any measure be captivated and held by the presence of God.

What can help us to make the experience of the *Hours* prayerful? This *Companion to the Hours* hopes to show some ways in which this can be done. In its approach it will draw on the rich spirituality of Carmel, especially that of Elizabeth of the Trinity. The book will offer detailed instructions on how its contents can be used to attend the praying of the *Hours*. The discussions of the psalms, canticles, and readings will act as spiritual commentaries and contribute, it is hoped, to the depth and intensity of “praying” the *Hours*.

The present *Companion* will comment on the psalms, canticles and readings in the 4-volume version of the *Liturgy of the Hours* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), which is the official text for the United States and Canada. This *Companion* should also prove valuable to anyone who is saying the *Liturgy of the Hours* in the format presented by the webpage: www.universalis.com.

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1.

Week I: Morning and Evening Prayer

*We shall see the beauty of your face
in the splendor of goodness.*

I: Morning Prayer

Sunday

Sunday, Week I, Morning Prayer we can describe as of vital interest. The two psalms and canticle begin our month of praise. We discover too that for all major feasts these portions are read even though the rest of the office may be different. Furthermore, only the selections of *Morning Prayer of Sunday, Week I*, are used on all feasts, not those of *Evening Prayer I or II*. How important, then, must these selections be! What psalms and canticle has the Church judged to express most fittingly the praise and reverence due to God on every joyous feast?

Psalm 63:2-9

This psalm uses direct address. How close we feel to God's presence in talking to him directly. And yet, at first, he is a presence that we seek and seem not to find. Then we encounter his love filling our being. Our days, yes, and our nights are enriched by his love. This psalm, therefore, expresses the experience of every person seeking God. We search for, we long after, we suffer the lack of God. When he is found, our joy knows no bounds. The Church calls on us to remember this experience every Sunday of *Week I* and every feast day throughout the year.

We can hear three voices in this psalm: our own, that of the whole Church, and that of Jesus dwelling within our souls. In our own voice we express our intense

longing for God. On one level, we can look outward for this God, searching the heavens, seeking through the universe for his presence. To us, sometimes, he may seem close, but now, sadly, he seems far away. The psalmist suggests that God is distant. We are like a desert, “a dry, weary land without water.” But God lives! He has his holy place; he is radiant with glory.

As we read this first stanza our perspective may also be Carmelite. The God we look for, the God we long for, is in the center of our souls. There is his “sanctuary”; there is his glory. But we have not yet found him. We are thirsting for his presence. We fix our inner gaze on him.

Stanza one describes how empty and barren we are without God. Stanza two tells us what happens when God floods our souls with his presence. The joy, the vitality, that we may feel within as life flows through our bodies is wonderful. But God’s love exceeds “life” in great measure. Best to be filled with this love! When we are, something so amazing happens within that our whole inner being is transformed. Praise wells up inside us.

Our lips pour forth this praise. We become aware of God’s presence in a way that will last our whole life. We are empowered by God so that it is in his “name,” in his strength and vigor, that we act. We “lift up” our hands. Our whole being is suffused with divine grace just as though our soul were at a “banquet.” It is “with joy” that praise pours from our lips.

Stanza three describes how pervasive God’s love can be. It is not only during the day that his presence transforms our lives. At night we think of God. We recall all the ways in which he has helped us. We realize one important truth: abiding in the divine presence brings safety. There we can rejoice. We are in a reciprocal relationship. Our soul “clings” to God, and God holds us “fast.”

In the Carmelite view, this God acts from within our being. When we do not find him, we long for him intense-

ly. When he is there, our whole being is transformed from within by his presence. He fills our mouths with praise. He empowers our actions. He gives us all inner riches. Through the night he remains an abiding presence. Inwardly, we cling to him, and he “holds” us firmly. God moves from the deep center of our hearts and makes himself known. The result is endless praise and joy.

In this psalm too we can hear the voice of Jesus as he dwells in our souls. He longs for the Father and looks for him. When he is filled with the Father’s love, he praises, blesses, rejoices. He stays with the Father at all times, at night remembering, musing, clinging, ever held “fast.” This Jesus is within us, loving us and praying for us. We can feel compassion for him as he shares our lives with us. When he is longing for God, our hearts weep for him. When he feels the presence of his Father, we rejoice at his joy. We come to share deeply in the life of Jesus. We realize that he is sharing equally in our spiritual life.

Canticle: Daniel 3:57-88, 56

This lovely canticle, preserved in the Septuagint, draws our hearts and minds to ponder the whole expanse of the universe. This song, sung by Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael in the fiery furnace, proclaims their staunch and immovable faith in God. In the furnace where the flames did not sear nor the heat destroy, their joy knew no bounds. God kept them safe and did not leave them alone. The king who had cast them into the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar, saw with astonishment that a fourth presence was walking with the three young men (Daniel 3:24). In the furnace, they turn their eyes outward and call on all of nature to praise and bless the Lord.

Knowing the context of this canticle, we see the Church teaching us a profound lesson, one that we will recall on every Sunday of *Week I* and on every feast day of the year. The three young men were willing to die for

their faith. With courage, they chose death and were cast into the raging flames. God did not fail them! He turned an experience of terror and horror into a victory. Flames and heat became the sweetness of God's presence in a "dew-laden breeze" (Daniel 3:50). So we, when faced with the challenges of life in whatever form they come, have here a model of behavior. In the face of attack from without, illness, pain, loss of loved ones, and all sorrow, we can be sure that God is faithful. He will be with us as a consoling presence. He will give us cause to burst forth into a song of praise. We will want all creation to know of his goodness. We will call on all God's creatures to bless him.

In this canticle, we can discern all three of our "voices." This call for praise is my call. In my personal life I can think of situations where God blessed me, and I would want the whole universe to bless him in turn for his goodness. This call for praise is that of the Church as a whole. How the universal Church can speak of the faithfulness and goodness of God! All we creatures receive our existence from God. We human beings owe our redemption to God and also our hopes for heaven. God creates, sustains, redeems, and sanctifies us moment by moment. Surely we wish the whole of creation to bless this God of ours.

The third voice is that of Jesus. The canticle can be truly his. Begotten of the Father and sent into our world, Jesus faced the horror of the crucifixion. He was not saved from death as the three young men were. Instead, becoming "sin" for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), he destroyed death itself with his triumphant return to life on this very day of resurrection that we are celebrating. Now, with the Father and also living in our souls, he can utter this canticle of triumph and joy. Yes, this is the song of Jesus!

In a special way this canticle can be the song of Jesus for the Father. We hear of Jesus:

He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him.

(John 1:10)

Paul tells us also of Jesus:

He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn of all creation.

For in him were created all things in heaven and
earth,

the visible and the invisible,

whether thrones or dominions or principalities or
powers;

all things were created through him and for him.

(Colossians 1:15-16)

The Father created his universe through his Word, Jesus. How fitting to hear in this canticle the call of Jesus for all his creation to praise and glorify the Father!

Can we look at this canticle from a Carmelite perspective? The canticle calls on all the natural phenomena in the universe to respond with joy to the presence of God. In a similar vein we might look within and take into consideration all the faculties that God has given us: intellect, imagination, memory, understanding, and especially our free will. We may wish to call upon these gifts to praise God. Most of all, we may center our will in our hearts and, like Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, who are “humble of heart,” praise God in complete adoration. Inwardly, therefore, we can strive to love the Lord, our God, “with all *our* heart, and with all *our* souls, and with all *our* strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5), matching the praise that all creation pours forth.

Psalm 149

In this third psalm of *Morning Prayer* the call is for the human being to praise God. It thus continues the

call for praise found in the canticle from Daniel. In this canticle all creation is summoned to bless God with the final verses calling upon human beings to do the same. Psalm 149 teaches us *how* we are to praise: we are to sing a “new song.” This exhortation is in accord with the nature of our spiritual journey. The past is gone; the present we can spend with God. The future is yet unreal but, if we get the present right, the future will be also right. Always, ever, from our souls a new song is to arise. We are different each day. There is always a new list of blessings which can form the substance of our song and can be the foundation of our gratitude.

Stanza one asks us to sing. Stanza two gives two reasons for this singing. First, God is delighted with us. What a wonderfully positive picture of God this is! We know that God loves us, but this description suggests that God likes our company, our actions, our personalities. Second, we wish to sing because, as we recognize our needs, as we happily call ourselves “poor” in relation to all inner righteousness, as we perceive how much grace we lack, we discover that God gives us “salvation.” This gift becomes our “glory.” With it we can “shout for joy” and “take our rest.”

In those two stanzas that summon us to “sing a new song” with joy, dancing, and music, we can discern two voices. First, our own that we are to raise in song, and second, the voice of the Church as it offers new praise to God. The Church is the new Israel and new Zion crowned with salvation and giving delight to God.

What, however, are we to make of the end of the second stanza and the final stanza with their references to punishment inflicted with a “two-edged sword”? We are told that to give punishment to “nations,” “peoples,” “kings,” and “nobles” is an honor for God’s “faithful.” Clearly none of us is going to perform this action in a literal way. With these lines the Carmelite perspective becomes valuable.

Looking at the psalm as a whole from this perspective we see a call to us, within our souls, to “sing a new song,” to “rejoice” and “exult.” We see our souls as “poor” but crowned with “salvation.” It is within that we will direct our powers of punishment. All in us that can be a source of sin, pride, or self-enhancement we can curb and restrain. Our faith makes it possible for us to discern what needs to be checked or rejected within. We will do so gladly and consider it an honor because such a course of action makes us “poor” in self and it is the poor that receive salvation.

From the Carmelite perspective, the “new song” comes from within. The whole person is to rejoice, dance, and sing because God “takes delight” in us and “crowns” us with “salvation.” This is the essential truth of Christianity and explains why this song is appropriate for *Sunday Week I* and for all great feasts. Those who are saved are people who have chosen the “narrow gate” and the “constricted . . . road that leads to life” (Matthew 7:13). Constantly curbing all that is alien to the increase of grace, souls find that they can “rejoice in their glory, shout for joy and take their rest.”

Reading: Revelation 7:10,12

The selection is brief but contains the essence of our position as Christians. We have been saved by the will of God. Jesus became the Lamb sacrificed for us. Everything that we can imagine human beings giving to God and everything that we imagine God being are now described: “Praise and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving and honor, power and might.” To such a situation we add: “So be it! Amen!”