03.09.19, Fassler and Baltzer, eds., The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages

The Medieval Review baj9928.0309.019

03.09.19


Reviewed by:
Sister Patricia Rumsey
Poor Clare Monastery
a.gardner@lamp.ac.uk

Recently, George Guiver was asked to address the Union of Monastic Superiors in Britain and Ireland on the subject of the Liturgy of the Hours. He commented: "...in truth there is not much to say. It is not an area where there is a ferment of thinking and research, nor a great outpouring of publications." This book of essays to honour the scholarly labours of Ruth Steiner is a refutation of his claim. Both the material in the book itself and the work of Steiner are proof positive that there is a very great deal of thinking and research on the subject of the Liturgy of the Hours taking place today. However, as the editors remark in their preface: "Liturgiologists in this century have not been particularly interested in the Latin Middle Ages, but have tended to concentrate on the early Christian period, finding there the best models for the restoration of public prayer in contemporary churches" (viii). So the Medieval Office "has been very little studied in our own age, and this in spite of the great explosion of scholarly work on the medieval period in this century. The Office is, when one considers the Latin West at least, the last great relatively unexplored frontier." This collection goes a long way to opening up that last frontier with its stated intention to "draw students of the Middle Ages, both scholars and nonspecialists, more deeply into this vast, little explored terrain."

While it might seem from a perusal of the list of contents that the choice of essay topics had been rather arbitrary, the reasons behind this choice are explained: the book "falls into five parts, each of which coheres around a particular period, aspect of the Office, or theme." There is an important "Prelude: Charting the Divine Office" by Lila Collamore which forms a very necessary introduction for anyone not immediately familiar with the structure of the Office. The next two chapters, by Margot Fassler and Laszlo Dobszay, form a methodological introduction. They examine early sources for the Western Office, taking Advent as an example (a disappointing feature here is the lack of any reference to the O Antiphons which from very early times have formed such a distinctive feature of the Advent Office), and then present some of the problems encountered when reading an early Office book. The next three excellent chapters (James W. McKinnon, Joseph Dyer and Peter Jeffery) focus on the pre-Carolingian Office. The first gives an introduction to the origins of the Western Office "from the peculiar point of view of the music historian"; the next gives a very thorough examination of one of the most influential of the early monastic rules, and the third looks in depth at Eastern and Western elements in the early Irish Office. This chapter illustrates new approaches in early Irish liturgiology; like O'Loughlin, on this side of the Atlantic, Jeffery traces the similarities between the Office presented in the Navigatio sancti Brendani and the writings of Cassian. He also makes the intriguing suggestion that the "ubiquitous Beatit" may be, not Ps. 118 (RSV 119), as many editors of Irish texts have concluded, but the text of the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt.5: 1-12). The following sections are concerned with the Liturgy of the tenth century and later; these
So why is this collection of essays so important? Are there other reasons besides the breadth and depth of the scholarly research? In their Preface, the editors make the point that the goal of liturgiologists in their research has been to find "models for the restoration of public prayer in contemporary churches" (viii). The Liturgy of the Hours is studied not merely for its own sake, fascinating though this is to the liturgiologist, the theologian, the historian, the musicologist and so many more...The cycles of prayer which were followed so devotedly by earlier generations of Christians are still being followed today, though not now as much by lay people as in early centuries.

In both his recent books, but especially in *Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church* Donald Cozzens makes clear the fact that there is a serious crisis regarding the sacramental life of the Christian Churches. How can de Lubac's well-known statement "The Eucharist makes the Church" be held as true when half the parishes in the world are lay-led and thus their members denied regular access to the sacraments? Until a braver and more courageous solution is found than that suggested in some current official documents, could it not be possible that "The Divine Office makes the Church"? There is an analogy between the theology of the Eucharist and the theology of the Liturgy of the Hours. Christ is mysteriously present in the Liturgy of the Hours, praying to his Father, and he draws the praying Christian into that prayer. So just as the believing Christian is changed into the Body of Christ by means of the Eucharist, so the praying Christian is transformed into Christ by means of the Liturgy of the Hours. The *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours* says: "Christian prayer draws its dignity from its sharing in the filial relationship of the Only-Begotten Son to the Father. The prayer he expressed in his earthly life with his own words in the name of and for the salvation of the entire human race, he continues to address to his Father in the whole Church and in all her members."

Since the very earliest days of the Church, "the ideal of the Christian life was that of a constant communion with God, maintained by as frequent prayer as possible. A Christian who did not pray every day, and even frequently, would not have been considered a Christian at all." So the Prayer of the Hours has always had an extremely significant place in the lives of Christians and the scope of these essays gives some idea of the tremendous complexity and richness of the Divine Office, its hymns, chants, antiphons and readings, its ceremonies and its theology as expounded in sermons, liturgical texts and monastic writings and the centrality of the place which it held during the Middle Ages.

In fact, Taft makes the challenging statement that "Before the Western Middle Ages no one would have dreamt of preferring daily private Mass to the common hours on weekdays. If such an affirmation leaves the reader perplexed, that only shows that we, too, are the victims of our own clichés. There is just as much (indeed, more) extant historical evidence for the obligation of daily morning and evening prayer, in common and incumbent on all, laity as well as clergy and religious, as there is for the obligation of Sunday Mass."

Thus Augustine describes how Monica went to church morning and evening and "never allowed anything to keep her away" so that she might hear the voice of God in the readings and God might hear her in her prayers. If the Divine Office were once again to regain this vital place in the lives of the faithful, the Church would be totally transformed. As well exercising their baptismal priesthood and uniting with Christ in his prayer of praise and intercession for the whole world, joining the praying community at regular times in the knowledge that Christians world wide were doing likewise would also provide an opportunity for the faithful to regain the sense of spiritual identity which has taken such a battering in recent times. The *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours* opens up challenging and exciting vistas of creativity regarding the Liturgy of the Hours when it states that "The Liturgy of the Hours should not be looked on as a beautiful monument of a past age, to be preserved almost unchanged in order to excite our admiration. On the contrary, it should come to life again with new meaning and grow to become once more the sign of a living community." and that "We may confidently hope that new ways and new forms may be found for our own age, as has always happened in the life of the Church."

If this vision is to become a reality, and if the Office is to be once again the "sign of a living community" as it was in its most rudimentary form for the earlier generation of believers and has been throughout the Christian centuries, as the essays in this book show, then serious scholarship and research must be available that their fruits may promote authentic liturgical renewal which is true to the tradition as well as adapted to present day needs. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* makes this clear: "Since the divine office, because it is the public prayer of the Church, should be a source of piety and nourishment for personal prayer, priests and others who take part in the divine office are earnestly exhorted in the Lord to attune their minds to their voices when praying it. The better to accomplish this let them take steps to improve their understanding of the liturgy, and of the Bible, especially of the psalms. In carrying out the revision the venerable treasure of the Roman office should be so adapted that all those to whom it is handed on may more extensively and easily draw profit from it." Hymns are to be restored to their original form, as far as may be desirable. Whatever savours of mythology or does not accord with Christian piety is to be removed or changed."
So studies such as these are vitally necessary, and it is also necessary that the fruit of this research does not remain hidden away in the world of academia to be the sole prerogative of historians, liturgiologists and musicologists, but becomes accessible to the wider Church. The past is a rich warehouse where valuable experience is stored, and The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages is a perfect example of this, as well as giving the lie to Guiver's remark that "there is not much to say" about the Liturgy of the Hours (in Fassler and Baltzer's book there are some twenty-four chapters, every one of which could be expanded into a book in its own right, and these twenty four chapters occupy between them some 560 pages). But the past is not a museum; the material there is not for display and admiration only, but for use and to be drawn on in today's world. This material needs to be made accessible and intelligible for the laity today in order that the Office can once again come into its rightful place as the Prayer of the whole Church. Anyone, from within any discipline -- "for it pertains immediately to every subject, from art history, to canon law, to biblical studies and hermeneutics, to gender studies and historiography" (ix) -- who has an interest in the Prayer of the Church and a desire for that to happen, should read and study this book.

Notes:


[[2]] Although Jeffery leaves the question open, he makes a convincing case for this suggestion. However, one argument which supports the traditional interpretation is that Bieler, The Irish Penitentials (Dublin, 1975), p.281, in the Table of Old-Irish Commutations presents the Beati recited four times as equivalent to the chanting of fifty psalms. Psalm 118 recited four times would seem a "fairer" equivalent here to fifty psalms, rather than the Beatitudes.

[[3]] Andrew Hughes estimates, p.521 -522, that "some 10,000 Office manuscripts survive."

[[4]] Andrew Hughes writes on p. 521 of "computer programs taking four hours to complete" -- a far cry from the days when it took Eadfrith an estimated six hours to execute the red dots on one page of the Lindisfarne Gospels.

[[5]] Donald Cozzens, Sacred Silence: Denial and the Crisis in the Church (Collegeville, Minnesota, 2002).

[[6]] If one is tempted to think that this is a modern phenomenon, one has only to consult Antonio Rosmini's The Five Wounds of the Church, trans. Denis Cleary, (Leominster, 1987). What is different today is the anger of the laity and their ability to do something to change the situation. Cf. Cozzens p. 6: "The current rage is galvanizing the laity into a force to be reckoned with."

[[7]] "...half the world's parishes are lay-led and in 15-20 years, in many of our dioceses there will not be a resident priest in most parishes." Mellitus Lawlor, Catholic Omnibus 26, Winter 2003,p. 9. "We insist on the central role of the Eucharist and sacraments in the lives of believers and tolerate the absence of a resident priest in almost half of the world's parishes," Cozzens, p. 158. These examples highlight the problem in the Roman Catholic Church; Cozzens makes it clear that the situation is similar in all the Christian Churches.

[[8]] General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours no. 7.


[[11]] Confessions, 5.9.17.

[[12]] General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours no. 273.

[[13]] Ibid.

[[14]] Didache 8:3.

[[15]] Sacrosanctum Concilium no. 90.

[[16]] Ibid. no. 93.
The Divine Office--the cycle of daily worship other than the Mass--is the richest source of liturgical texts and music from the Latin Middle Ages. However, its richness, the great diversity of its manuscripts, and its many variations from community to community have made it difficult to study, and it remains largely unexplored terrain. This volume is a practical guide to the Divine Office for students and scholars throughout the field of medieval studies. The book surveys the many questions related to the Office and presents the leading analytical tools and research methods now used in the field.