

HYMNS ARE MEANT TO BE SUNG

MY DICTIONARY tells me, what I had always suspected, that a hymn is a song of praise to God. People may be surprised that I should say “suspected”—but I have a sorrowful recollection that even on Easter Day, in our parish, the priest merely said the sequence to himself. The hymns of the breviary, too, are nowadays said by many, sung by few. It was not always so. A recent article in the *Downside Review* talking about the office in the days of St. Benedict, pointed out in an illuminating footnote, that people of his day would have reacted to the idea of monotoned hymns or psalmody very much as we here in England would to the proposal that on some national occasion we should monotone *God Save the King!*

I am not here advocating the complete singing of the office in all our churches at the present time, though I should surely welcome it, but I well realize how utopian is my feeling on the subject. It is well to remember, however, that in medieval times all the parish churches had the office sung, at least on Sundays, and in very many churches it was sung daily. I suppose the congregations on a weekday may not have been any larger than they would be in a typical parish nowadays. In those days, though, the service of the Church was carried out primarily as God’s work, and the numbers of the congregation present at it were but a secondary affair: now we are more inclined to count heads and measure our success *per capita*.

Indeed, at the present day, it would be difficult enough to sing Matins everyday according to the Roman breviary, for it is well-nigh impossible to obtain books with the chant. Since the arrangement of the psalter was changed by *Divino afflatu*, the complete antiphoner has never been published, and it seems unlikely that it will be for the present. I should be loath to say, indeed, when the last edition for the old psalter was brought out. (The antiphoner for the day hours has been published of course.)

I was forcibly reminded of the lack of means for singing the night office when I bought, just before the war, what purported

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to be a Holy Week book with the complete chant for all the office from Palm Sunday to Low Sunday inclusive. But the Matins of Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in Holy Week, as well as the Matins of Wednesday to Saturday in Easter Week appeared without note, for as the publishers remarked in their catalogue (and they should surely know!): "*Les matines de ces jours ne se chantent nulle part.*" If the chant is never printed they never will be!

My concern here is with the hymns of the breviary. I have been led to wonder, incidentally, why it is that in so many places where they say office in choir, so rarely do they sing at least the hymns of the different hours even if they monotone all the rest. Too few in choir? Too difficult? That may be so, but why does the difficulty vanish, as I have known it to do in so many convents, when after a Sunday Vespers recited *recto tono* the good nuns break out into splendid harmonies for the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament which follows?

A more reasonable objection could be put in some such words as these. "If you want us to sing the hymns give us words that can be sung!" The objection does not hold good for the ordinary weekday hymns, but it is certainly valid for some of the more modern feastday hymns. Some of them are difficult enough to say and understand, let alone sing—unless you are a vocal gymnast. Generally the more modern they are the more are they involved, and obviously composed from the point of view of private recitation. Most of the older ones are better in this respect.

St. Ambrose is said to have introduced metrical hymns into Christian worship in the West. (See the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, IX, 6 and 7.) St. Benedict in his *Rule* (9 ff.) prescribes a hymn, which he calls *Ambrosianum*, at each canonical hour, but for long there were no hymns at the office in the Roman basilicas, and they were not introduced there until the thirteenth century. Many new hymns were composed in the middle ages: Christian Latin poetry seems then to have reached its zenith.

A revision of the hymns of the breviary was made under the direction of Urban VIII in the seventeenth century by a committee of four Jesuits. In his Bull introducing the reformed hymns

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the pope says that not a few learned and pious men had complained that, in spite of St. Pius V's reform of the breviary, it still held many defects. The pope took the opportunity of having the hymns re-cast in accordance with his own classical taste. The trouble was that the revisers seem to have been unable to distinguish between classical poetry and Christian hymnography.

At first these new versions were published in a little booklet and their use was allowed to those who desired it: a few years later they were incorporated in the breviary in the place of the older versions and their use was made obligatory. But the Chapter of St. Peter's in Rome never adopted the new hymns nor did they find their way into the breviaries of the Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, Dominicans, Carmelites or Premonstratensians. Anyone who wants to compare the two versions should obtain a breviary of one of these and put it side by side with a modern Roman breviary. There is an old tag which completely sums up the situation, and that must be my excuse for trotting it out again here: "*Accedit Latinitas, recessit pietas* — Improved Latinity, diminished piety."

To attempt a comparison between the two versions would take too much space, but it is worth doing if the older versions are not known. In some of the hymns only a word here and there was changed, in others the hymn was entirely re-written. I give here but one example of this. Readers who want more should look up for themselves the two forms of the hymns for St. Michael (29th September) and All Saints (November 1st). The example I have chosen is the hymn for the office of the dedication of a church; it is really one long hymn divided into two parts—one for Matins or Vespers, the other for Lauds. Here is the first strophe, as it used to be and as it is now in the Roman breviary:

Urbs Jerusalem beata,
Dicta pacis visio,
Quae construitur in caelis
Vivis ex lapidibus,
Et angelis coronata
Ut sponsata comite.

Caelestis urbs Jerusalem,
Beata pacis visio,
Quae celsa de viventibus
Saxis ad astra tolleris
Sponsaeque ritu cingeris
Mille angelorum millibus.

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The worst part of the revision of this hymn is in the first strophe at Lauds where instead of

Angularis fundamentum
Lapis Christus missus est.

the revisers wrote:

Alto ex Olympi vertice
Summi Parentis Filius.

Altogether they were too fond of such words as "*Olympus*" with its pagan associations.

We may certainly hope for a return to the older forms of the hymns. Some indeed thought that it was coming when the new psalter of Pius X came out in 1911. Few would regret the passing of the seventeenth century versions.

Since those days hymns have been written for the newer offices. Some of them carry on the old traditions, but others are by no means all that can be desired. There is that strophe in the office of the Sacred Heart:

Ex corde scisso ecclesiae
Christo jugata nascitur,
Hoc ostium arcae in latere est
Genti ad salutem positum.

The ideas, of course, are above reproach; it is the language in which they are couched that I complain of. Modern writers of hymns should be made to sing the office in choir before they start to compose their verses, and having composed them should be obliged to sing them unaccompanied for the edification of their brethren. It was St. Bernard, I think, who said, very rightly, "*Quod ad cantum spectat hymnum composui metri negligens, ut sensui non deessem*—In regard to chant, I composed a hymn, paying less attention to the metre that I might be the more true to the sense." To which Mabillon added a comment which I heartily re-echo: "*Quod utinam imitarentur qui, ut metri regulas servant, sensus contortos et implexos efficiunt, et cantum exasperant cum verba elidunt*—Would that his example might be imitated by those who in their anxiety to observe metric rules complicate and distort the sense, and by eliding syllables make singing annoyingly difficult."

ROGER CAPEL

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