

VESPERS

This subject will be treated under the following headings:

- I. Vespers in the sixth century;
- II. The origin of Vespers;
- III. The Office of Vespers in the Middle Ages: Variations;
- IV. The latest changes;
- V. Symbolism: the Hymns;
- VI. Importance.

Vespers in the sixth century

In the sixth century the Office of Vespers in the **Latin Church** was almost the same as it has been throughout the **Middle Ages** and up to the present day. In a document of unquestionable authority of that period the Office is described as follows: The evening hour, or *vespertina synaxis*, is composed of four psalms, a capitulum, a response, a **hymn**, a versicle, a canticle from the Gospel, **litany** (*Kyrie eleison*, *Christe eleison*), Pater with the ordinary finale, *oratio*, or **prayer**, and dismissal (Regula Sancti Benedicti, xvii). The psalms recited are taken from the series of psalms from Pss. cix to cxlvii (with the exception of the groups cxvii to cxvii and cxxxiii to cxlii); Pss. cxxxviii, cxliii, cxliv are each divided into two portions, whilst the Pss. cxv and cxvi are united to form one. This disposition is almost the same as that of the "Ordo Romanus", except that the number of psalms recited is five instead of four. They are taken, however, from the series cix to cxlvii. Here, too, we find the capitulum, versicle, and canticle of the "Magnificat". The **hymn** is a more recent introduction in the Roman Vespers; the finale (litanies, Pater, versicles, **prayers**) seems all to have existed from this epoch as in the **Benedictine cursus**. Like the other hours, therefore, Vespers is divided into two parts; the psalmody, or singing of the psalms, forming the first part, and the capitulum and formulæ the second. Vesper time varied according to the season between the tenth hour (4 p. m.) and the twelfth (6 p. m.). As a matter of fact it was no longer the evening hour, but the sunset hour, so that it was celebrated before the day had departed and consequently before there was any necessity for artificial light (Regula S. Benedicti, xli). This is a point to be noted, as it was an innovation. Before this epoch this evening synaxis was celebrated with all the torches alight. The reason of this is that St. Benedict introduced in the *cursus*, another hour--that of **Compline**--which was prescribed to be celebrated in the evening, and which might be considered as a kind of doubling of the Office of *Lucernarium*.

Origin of Vespers: period anterior to the sixth century

The **Rule of St. Benedict** was written about 530-43 and represents the Office of Vespers drawn up in the manner shown above. Much earlier than this we find an evening Office corresponding to both that of Vespers and that of **Compline**. Its name varies. In St. Benedict we find the name *vespera* which has prevailed, whence the **French** word *vêpres* and the English *vespers*. Cassian calls it *Vespertina synaxis*, or *Vespertina solemnitas* (P.L., XLIX, 88-9). The name, however, by which it was most widely known during that period was *Lucernalis* or *Lucernaria hora* (l. c., 126). This name is characteristic. It was so called because at this hour a number of candles were lighted, not only to give light, but also for symbolical purposes. The "Peregrinatio", which gives the **liturgical** order as practised at **Jerusalem** and the **date** of which is probably the fourth century, calls it *Lichnicon*. This is the Latin transcription of the Greek word *lychnikon*, which corresponds to the word *Lucernarium* (cf. **AMBROSIAN LITURGY AND RITE**). The author tells us that this Office took place at the tenth hour (four o'clock in the evening); it is really the Office *des lumières*, i.e. of the lights; it was celebrated in the **Church** of the Holy Sepulchre; all the lamps and torches of the church were lighted, making, as the author says, "an **infinite** light". The *Lucernal* psalms were sung, after which followed the recitation of the supplication and commemorations or **litanies**, then the **prayers**, and finally the blessing and dismissal. In the "Antiphony of Bangor", an **Irish** document of the sixth century, Vespers are called *hora duodecima*, which corresponds to six o'clock in the evening, or *hora incensi*, or again *ad cereum benedicendum*. All these names are interesting to note. The *hora incensi* recalls the custom of burning **incense** at this hour, while at the same time the candles were lighted. The term *ad cereum benedicendum* presents a still greater interest because it reminds us that the **ceremony** of the lights at Vespers was symbolic and very solemn. In Prudentius (fourth century) we find a **hymn** entitled "Ad incensum lucernæ" which, according to some critics, would appear to have been composed for the hour of the *Lucernarium* (Arevalo, "Prudenti carmina", I, 124, ed. 1788; cf. also Cabrol, "Les églises de Jérusalem, la discipline et la liturgie au IVe siècle", 47). Others see in this an allusion to the **ceremony** of the **paschal candle**. However, the *Lucernarium* may have had, at that time, some analogy with the **ceremony** of **Holy Saturday**, and the **hymn** could thus be adapted to one or the other. In the "Old Gallican Sacramentary" (Thomasi, "Opera", VI, 395) we find for **Holy Saturday** an *oratio ad duodecima*, designed to celebrate the light as well as the **Resurrection**, which would seem thus to favour our

hypothesis. **St. Basil** also speaks of a **hymn** being sung at the moment when the torches were lighted, doubtless the famous **hymn**--"Lumen hilare" (cf. Cabrol, l. c., 47-8).

Vespers, then, was the most solemn Office of the day and was composed of the psalms called *Lucernales* (**Psalm 140** is called *psalmus lucernalis* by the Apostolic Constitutions, VIII, xxxv; cf. II, lix; also Cabrol, l. c.). The "Peregrinatio" does not mention the number of psalms sung at this hour, but Cassian, who, a short time after the "Peregrinatio", describes this Office as it was celebrated by the **monks of Egypt**, says they recited twelve psalms as at Vigils (**Matins**). Then two lessons were read as at Vigils, one from the Old, and the other from the New, Testament. Each psalm was followed by a short **prayer** (P.L., XLIX, 83-4, 88-9). For the rest Cassian agrees with the "Peregrinatio". He says the Office was recited towards five or six o'clock and that all the lights were lighted. This evening synaxis is looked upon as a souvenir of the evening sacrifice of the **Old Law**. The use of **incense**, candles, and other lights would seem to suggest the Jewish rites which accompanied the evening sacrifice (**Exodus 29:39; Numbers 28:4; Psalm 140:2; Daniel 9:21; 1 Chronicles 23:30**; cf. Haneberg, "Die relig. Alterth. der Bibel", **Munich**, 1869, p. 362). It may thus be seen that the *Lucernarium* was, together with Vigils, the most important part of the Offices of the day, being composed of almost the same elements as the latter, at least in certain regions. Its existence in the fourth century is also confirmed by **St. Augustine**, **St. Ambrose**, **St. Basil**, **St. Ephraem**, and, a little later, by several councils in **Gaul** and **Spain**, and by the various monastic rules (see texts in Bäumer-Biron, l. c., 78, 80, 118-27, 188-98, 208, etc.). The "Apostolic Constitutions" (VIII, xxi, 34, 35) describe it in almost the same terms as the "Peregrinatio". Before the fourth century we find allusions to the evening **prayer** in the earlier Fathers, **Clement I of Rome** (Clemens Romanus), **St. Ignatius**, **Clement of Alexandria**, **Tertullian**, **Origen**, the Canons of **St. Hippolytus**, **St. Cyprian** (for texts see Bäumer-Biron, l. c., I, 20 sqq., 73-4, 76, 78). **Pliny**, in his famous letter at the beginning of the second century, speaks of **liturgical** reunions of the **Christians** in the morning and in the evening: "coetus antelucani et vespertini" (Ep., x, 97). Vespers is, therefore, together with Vigils, the most ancient Office known in the **Church**.

Office of Vespers in the Middle Ages: variations

We have already remarked that the institution of the Office of **Compline** transformed the *Lucernarium* by taking from it something of its importance and symbolism, the latter at the same time losing its original sense. We have seen that St. Benedict calls it only *Vespera*, the name which has prevailed over that of *Lucernarium* (cf. **Ducange**, "Glossarium med. et inf. lat.", s.v. *Vesperae*). The Gallican Liturgy, the Mozarabic Liturgy, and, to a certain extent, the **Milanese**, have preserved the *Lucernarium* (cf. Bäumer-Biron, l. c., 358). The **Greek Church** retains the "Lumen hilare" and some other traces of the ancient *Lucernarium* in the Offices of Vespers and **Compline** (cf. Smith, "Dict. Christ. Antiq.", s.v. *Office, Divine*). In the Rule of St. Columbanus, dated about 590, Vespers still has twelve psalms, amongst which are Pss. cxii and cxiii, the **Gradual psalms**, Pss. cxix sqq. (cf. Gougaud, "Les chrétientés celtiques", 309; "Dict. d'arch. chrét. et de liturgie", s.v. *Celtique*, 3015). The "Antiphony of Bangor", a document of **Irish** origin, gives for Vespers **Psalm 112** and also the "Gloria in excelsis". For modifications since the twelfth century, cf. Bäumer-Biron, l. c., II, 54 sqq.

Latest changes

The **Decree** "Divino afflatu" (1 Nov., 1911) involves some important changes in the old Roman Office. New psalms are appointed for each day of the week. These psalms are to be recited with their **antiphons**, not only at the Office *de tempore* (Sundays and feriæ) but also on feasts of a lesser rite than doubles of the second class, that is to say, on simples, semidoubles (double minors), and double majors. On feasts which are doubles of the second class and *a fortiori* of the first class, as well as on feasts of the Blessed Virgin, the Holy Angels, and Apostles, the psalms are proper to the feast as heretofore. On all feasts, of whatever rite, the second part of Vespers, that is, the capitulum, **hymn**, antiphon of the "Magnificat", is taken from the *Sanctorale*. On semi-doubles and those of a lesser rite the suffrages are now reduced to a single antiphon and orison which is common to all the **saints** heretofore commemorated, whilst the *preces* ("Miserere" and versicles) formerly imposed on the greater feriæ are now suppressed.

Symbolism: the hymn

Notwithstanding the changes brought about in the course of **time**, Vespers still remains the great and important Office of the evening. As already pointed out, it recalls the *sacrificium vespertinum* of the **Old**

Law. In the same manner as the night is consecrated to God by the Office of the Vigil, so also is the end of the day by Vespers. It terminates, as **Matins** formerly terminated, and **Lauds** at present terminates, by a lection, or reading, from the Gospel, or *canticum evangelii*, which, for Vespers, is always the "Magnificat". This is one of the characteristic traits of Vespers, one of the liturgical elements which this particular Office has retained in almost all regions and at all times. There are, however, a few exceptions, as in some liturgies the "Magnificat" is sung at **Lauds** (cf. Cabrol in "Dict. d'arch. et de liturgie", s.v. *Cantiques évangéliques*). This place of honour accorded so persistently to the canticle of Mary from such remote antiquity is but one of the many, and of the least striking, proofs of the devotion which has always been paid to the Blessed Virgin in the Church. The psalms used at Vespers have been selected, from time immemorial, from Pss. cix to cxlvii, with the exception of **Psalm 118**, which on account of its unusual length does not square with the others, and is consequently ordinarily divided up into parts and recited at the little hours. Pss. i to cviii are consecrated to **Matins** and **Lauds**, whilst the three last psalms, cxlviii to cl, belong invariably to **Lauds**. The series of hymns consecrated to Vespers in the **Roman Breviary** also form a class apart and help to give us some hints as to the symbolism of this hour. The hymns are very ancient, dating probably, for the most part, from the sixth century. They have this particular characteristic - they are all devoted to the praise of one of the days of the Creation, according to the day of the week, thus: the first, "Lucis Creator optime", on Sunday, to the creation of light; the second, on Monday, to the separation of the earth and the waters; the third, on Tuesday, to the creation of the plants; the fourth, on Wednesday, to the creation of the sun and moon; the fifth, on Thursday, to the creation of the fish; the sixth, on Friday, to the creation of the beasts of the earth; Saturday is an exception, the hymn on that day being in honour of the **Blessed Trinity**, because of the Office of Sunday then commencing.

Importance

We can now see the great importance which the Church appears to have attached always to the Office of Vespers. It is the only one which has remained popular (excepting, of course, the **Holy Sacrifice** which we do not consider here as an Office) among pious Christians up to the present day. **Matins** and **Lauds**, on account of the hour at which they are celebrated, have always been more or less inaccessible to the faithful; likewise the little hours, except, perhaps, **Terce**, which serves as an introduction to the Mass. Vespers, on the contrary, occupies a privileged place towards the end of the day. On **Sundays** it is the

Office most likely to bring the faithful together in church for the second time and thus becomingly completes the Divine Service for that day. This is why, in the majority of Catholic countries, the custom of Sunday Vespers has been for so long a time, and is still, maintained. It is quite conformable to tradition, moreover, to invest this Office with a particular solemnity. The Vesper psalms, as well as the hymns and antiphons, are well calculated to edify the faithful. Lastly, the ancient custom of having a lection or reading from the Old, or from the New, Testament, or from the homilies of the Fathers, might well in certain cases and to a certain extent be re-adopted, or serve as the subject-matter for the sermon which is sometimes delivered at this service.