



# Allocutio



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## Allocutio: The Divine Office and the Rosary

Some of you raised last month the question of the Divine Office.

This has a long history going back to Old Testament times and perhaps going back before that too.

Certainly there were set times for prayer. This practice of praying at set times may have been there in some primitive form. Even in the world before Abraham. The Old Testament speaks of times of prayer. When the psalms were composed and approved by Jewish society they became part of worship and prayer. Christ himself was familiar with the psalms for he quotes from them often. They were part of his prayers. As a child he would have learnt them and prayed them. We are told that he and the disciples sang a psalm on the way to the Garden of Gethsemane. So that when we pray the psalms we are using the psalms that Christ himself and the apostles used.

We are the body, Christ is the Head. If the Head prayed then his Body must be in harmony with him. And from very early in the Church various people would pray in common and use the psalms. Monks and nuns certainly did. The Church then enjoined on the clergy that they too say the psalms. In some enclosed communities they had a practice of starting at Psalm 1 and continuing until Psalm 150 and then restart. Time and time again the system has been looked at. Today the Divine Office, the official and public prayer of the Church, consists of 7 hours: a) Psalms and the office of readings which the Church generally celebrates at the Easter Vigil but is practiced by religious and priests throughout the year; b) Morning Prayer or Lauds; c) d) e) three hours throughout the day; f) Evening prayer or Vespers; g) night prayer or Compline.

In each of these hours psalms are recited followed by a reading from Scripture and a collect. In the case of Morning Prayer or Lauds the Benedictus and prayers of intercession are also said. In the case of Evening Prayer or Vespers the Magnificat and prayers of Intercession are also added.

This official prayer of the Church is enjoined on all those who are monks and nuns. Depending on their Constitutions different religious say all or some of these hours, as they are called. The diocesan clergy also carry the breviary and promise to enter this prayer for the Church. It is part of every priest's obligation, an obligation that begins at diaconate. It is established that at least morning and evening prayer is the minimum that should be said each day.

There is no obligation on the laity to say the office. But that is where the Rosary came in because the 150 Hail Mary's was seen as the lay persons' form of saying the 150 psalms. It has always been accepted that laity who say the Rosary are fulfilling their office!

Laity can of course volunteer to say some of the Divine Office or all of it if so inclined. And many do. It is generally accepted that to fulfil the office at minimum is to say Lauds and Vespers. And that is why the short office has been put together for the laity.

How best to pray the psalms? The risk is of "getting it in" and rushing it without any spirit of prayer. Ideally we should all calm ourselves before prayer or at its beginning and dispose ourselves to connect with what we are doing. (By the way this applies too to attending Mass!) It is always good if we can focus on the words and take their meaning into our hearts. With some psalms this is not too hard, such as the Miserere. "Have mercy on me O God in your kindness, in your compassion blot out my guilt . . ." But some psalms do need an effort. They may have been written in circumstances far from our normal life.



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Remember that they are all ultimately about Christ. So e.g. on Wednesday evening week 2 we hear in Psalm 61, “How long will you all attack one man to break him down as though he were a tottering wall of a tumbling fence?” This was written by some person who felt everyone was against him. But prophetically we can see Christ in it who is being taken out for crucifixion. In that light much of the psalm now makes sense, “In God is my safety and glory, the rock of my strength. Take refuge in God all you people. Trust him at all times. Pour out your hearts before him for God is our refuge.” There is no doubt but that the psalms he knew so well meant so much to Christ in his Passion. The obvious one jumps out is Psalm 22, “My God my God why have you forsaken me?” If you have not read it yet do so. It will amaze you!

Sometimes we can read the opposition and the enemy mentioned in the psalms as those who persecute the Church, sometimes our own sins and bad habits, sometimes it may bring to your mind a very definite opponent, even the devil.

Some of the psalms can have a very real present significance. Take again Psalm 84. “O Lord you once favoured your land!” Yes God did favour us once. But now we just wonder. The psalm goes on, “Revive us now God our helper . . . will your anger never cease? Will you not again restore our life that your people may rejoice in you”. We pray for the recovery of our Church in Ireland. But again that psalm might have a very different meaning for someone sick and frail who is facing physical health problems. No matter how we interpret it in the present or use it, it is good to read the next words, “I will hear what the Lord God has to say, a voice that speaks of peace . . . the Lord will make us prosper . . . and peace shall follow his steps.

To help praying the office better some communities and individuals stop at each psalm and go back on one line that means something to them and stay with it for a few moments in quiet. So if the words, “Listen to the voice of the Lord, a voice that speaks of peace” touch your heart just stay with that and let it sink in. It can bring a lot of healing to the soul to do so. That stopping and taking a line or phrase or word may help you pray better.

What most matters is that we do pray and anything that helps you pray should not be sneezed at. For example there is a different form of office being provided for us in the recent publication *The Magnificat*. It is simpler and has its own logic. Would this suffice for fulfilling Praetorian membership? That is for Concilium to decide. But that does not matter if it helps you and enables you to pray. And let us never forget that all the little children of Fatima had was a very truncated Rosary! Their simplicity of soul attracted Mary to them! You can try the office, but if it gets in the way of your relationship with God stop and ask what really helps.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill