

# Reflections on Breviary Reform

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*Theology Digest*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Autumn 1953

## Introduction

Among Europeans the question of Breviary Reform is not a new one. Since the establishment by Blessed Pius X of a commission to reform the liturgy, much has been written and is still being written on the question. In this article which appeared in *L'Ami du Clergé*, 63 (Nov. 29, 1951), pp. 721-726, the author lays down some essential principles which should guide any attempts to reform the Office. His views, it is to be remembered, are those of one whose attitude towards the Breviary is colored by a life intimately devoted to the choral recitation of the Office.

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There have been numerous answers to my previous work (*L'Ami du Clergé*, 1950, p. 705-713) on Breviary Reform, which I wish to discuss in this paper, especially those that bear on the question of the public celebration and private recitation of the Divine Office. Those who are in favor of reform have made many suggestions. They complain that the office is too complex, that it requires too much searching and page-turning, that the succession of responses and versicles, proper to the choral Office is more calculated to irritate one than to foster his piety. Another desires to see the Psalter and Scripture spread out over a longer period of time, rather than crammed into a week or a year respectively. Others would have the ferial psalms recited with still greater frequency so that their value too could be appreciated. The suppression of octaves, the elimination of excessive number of feast days, the combining of several saints into groups commemorated together, the correction of the lessons, the restoration of the ancient hymn texts, these seem to

be elements that would be popular with all. Some would even reject the small hours, as being suited more to the use of monks than to the use of the ordinary priest. These and other suggestions are proposed.

### **Suggestions for Reform**

Detailed schemes also are suggested: revision of the make-up of the individual hours, various suggestions for simplifying their recitation, various means of integrating the Breviary with the Mass. But too often such plans are inspired more by pious feelings rather than by any true liturgical sense. If reform continued along such lines little or nothing would be gained. I do not deny that such proposals have their advantages and attractive elements but they do not seek a reform of the Breviary, but rather the establishment of a completely new Office. The loss involved is in no way proportionate to the good that might be achieved.

Some are opposed almost entirely to an idea of reform. Such opposition could arise from a keen sense of the obligation which the Church imposes. Others are opposed because they see in such change a spirit of criticism entirely foreign to so sacred an institution. It seems to them to indicate a failure to appreciate truly something that is of the essence of the priestly life. There is danger too of usurping the place of authority. Also, the very multiplicity of plans and projects seems to be against reform, for from so many plans it is difficult to imagine how a single coherent plan could be arranged.

Such fears arise from praiseworthy motives. But we need not fear that subjects will assume the place of authority in this regard. The Church is well able to handle such a problem. On the contrary, it is in her own interest that the Church should consult the needs of her children in this regard.

The question of the Breviary is one that will best be settled by a general expression of ideas, needs, and difficulties, since the question itself is so complex and of such importance for the priests of the world.

### **The Liturgy a Living Thing**

But one must remember that the Church, as a living body, is obliged to preserve her own traditions, and at the same time to evolve, reform, renew, keeping her evolution consistent with her true self. Her public prayer, the liturgy, does not escape this law. In the past the Breviary has never ceased to undergo change. That such development has stopped now is hard to realize. This is true even though we have arrived in our day at a more or less static concept of the liturgy. Since the time of St. Pius V, (1568) all legislation in this matter has been left to the Congregation of Rites, which fact has tended to limit initiative in this regard.

In this matter of reform, however, as in all other things, it is difficult to know where to stop. Those who seek to guard and keep the liturgical laws wonder just how it is possible to guide the reform along the lines of traditional principles. There is need to find the mean between extreme reform and over-cautious timidity. In doing this, then, it seems best to keep the general organization of the Office with all its essential elements, while correcting only what is in need of change.

Some practical ways, this could be done are: by realigning the calendar, simplifying the number of feasts, eliminating the *preces*, the *suffragia* and commemorations, abridging the rubrics, correcting the lessons and making a new selection of them, and providing the new *Ordo*, simplified for private recitation. And all this without touching the general make-up of the Office. But on the mere pretext of making the Office more intelligible, it would be fatal to deprive

it of its heritage and its symbolism. The Breviary cannot be allowed to become a book of private meditation, or spiritual reading, or a sort of historical chronicle.

I have sought on other occasions (*Ephemerides Liturgicae*, 1949, p 412; *Vita Christiana*, 1950, p 546; *La Maison Dieu*, 1951, No. 27, p. 1) to show that the Roman Breviary is in special need of reform because its true worth is not entirely realized by those who read it every day. The Office which the Roman Breviary contains is basically a service developed for common choral recitation at fixed times during the course of the day and night, whereas the ordinary priest is accustomed to recite it alone, in a low voice and at no special time, but rather at his own convenience.

### **History of the Office**

If we go back to the beginnings of the Office, we find that public prayer developed in a rather spontaneous fashion. The early assemblies of the Christians, with their communal readings, psalms, and hymns form the foundations of what later became the Office. This prayer was not precise and determined; it was the function of the religious and laity more than of the clergy; it was more private than public. Only gradually did it become official and public.

About the time of the sixth century, the make-up of the Office grew out of the distribution of the different parts of the services to the different churches of the city and locality. The clergy took part according to their rank and position in the celebration of the services of a determined church.

The idea of a complete daily office celebrated each day under obligation by the clergy of a determined church finds its roots in the monastic foundations established around the larger churches and basilicas. This was especially true in Rome where the Popes

entrusted the services of the great basilicas to religious. From there it spread throughout the West as more and more bishops were selected from the monasteries. The liturgy of these groups also served as the basis of the Carolingian reform in the early ninth century.

During this period, not all the clerics had the same Office, as all did not have the same share in its recitation, but each assisted according to his rank and order. Those who were charged with country parishes and whose work was for the most part missionary, took very little part in the public Offices. Those who were attached to the basilicas and city churches and who had the requisite leisure devoted a great deal of time to the choral recitation of the Office. Likewise those clerics who were attached to a certain church and received a benefice from it were obliged to share in the solemn Offices of that church. It was this form that the Office took, and in which it lasted up to the Council of Trent, and persists even today in European cathedrals and churches to which a “college” of canons is attached.

### **The Office and Public Prayer**

The main difficulty, when one speaks of the reform of the Breviary, comes, I think, from the fact that one refers almost universally to the Roman Breviary and its private recitation, without taking into consideration its long evolution. Since the solemn choral recitation is almost abandoned, at least by the secular clergy, many conclude that its public recitation is an exception, whereas in reality it remains the rule, however little carried into execution. It seems almost to be an anomaly that one who recites his office privately, should be obliged to recite a prayer fashioned for public, choral recital. To recite privately a public prayer does not in itself give that prayer a “public” value, and does not of itself confer on it the value of a “public” act. Such “public” value can come to that act, if it is designated as such by the Church. In this way the prayer become

public. This meaning of public prayer, as “prayer imposed by the Church” takes its origin in a juridical sense of obligation. Such a concept of public prayer did not originate with the Holy See, but was at first rather the work of the bishops who legislated in this way for their subjects. Provincial and general councils likewise spread the idea, and finally the Popes following such decisions adopted their policy concerning the private recitation of the Office. As the public recitation became rarer, the private recitation became part of the official prayer of the Church.

### **Late Development of Private Recitation**

The unification of formulae had a great deal to do with the stabilization of the private recitation of the Breviary. In the beginning each individual diocese organized and celebrated its own peculiar Office. They prayed in the name and for the benefit of the whole Church, but not in any uniform was a unification based on the Office of the Roman basilicas but it did not suppress local differences. When St. Pius V imposed the Roman Breviary on the whole Church, the consequent uniformity of formulae had its advantages. But this took place at the very time that the custom of private recitation was growing. The point that is missed is that while the public recitation (where still found) was enriched tremendously by such a move, the private recitation, as a mere substitute for the choral Office, was restricted to a formula that did not suit it. There was not sufficient time given to allow for the development of a form suitable for private recitation.

There are several reasons why such an Office failed to develop. First, the Breviary reform of the 13th century was not the work of men who recited the Breviary privately, but was done by members of religious orders, and especially of the mendicant orders, whose life was centered, at least in spirit, around a communal recitation of the Breviary. The Breviary of Innocent III and of Nicholas III was

derived from the Breviary of the Minims [aka, the Friars Minors, or Franciscans—Ed.], and soon became the breviary of the Roman Church. In thus borrowing the office of the friars, the *Ordo Romanae Curiae* became essentially a choral Office for the use of clerics attached to the service of a fixed Church.

In the 16th century the emphasis of reform was directed at clerical life lived in common, especially through the formation of the orders of clerks regular. These groups were attached to the choral Office. It was the Theatines, for instance, who worked on the Breviary reform of Paul IV, and it was their work that issued in the decrees of St. Pius V. Only the Jesuits, among these orders, broke with tradition and opened the way to modern conceptions.

### **An Abortive Attempt**

In 1527 Cardinal Quignonez was assigned to prepare a Breviary specially designed for private recitation. Leaving intact the choral Office, he strove to compose a new Office which he believed would be more in conformity with ancient tradition and more apt to serve the spiritual interests of priests bound to the private recitation. Approved by Paul III in 1535, the book was a grand success; it was praised on all sides, and it went through over a hundred editions before it was suppressed by Pius V in 1568. But because its principles were too radical and because it was too great a departure from the past, the Church chose to abandon and to delay her reform rather than to break so completely with her traditions.

A balance must be achieved between private praying and official public prayer, even if recited privately by nearly all priests. This can be done, and done discretely and with proper submission to authority. There can be no reason why the Office, which in the past has absorbed so many diverse elements, cannot now absorb and integrate private recitation. Certainly let the choral Office continue

with full and undiminished fervor in the monastic and regular churches and in European cathedrals and collegiate churches. But also let there be given to the priests who are absorbed by the works of the ministry, by mission work, by teaching, an Office suited to their work, yet still inspired by the whole background of the development of the Roman liturgy.

### **A New Breviary Not Required**

It is not necessary for such reform to compose a new Breviary. It suffices to make a distinction between choral and private recitation:

- 1) to permit a good number of choral parts to be omitted at option in private recitation;
- 2) and to eliminate many of the complexities of the present system.
  - a) To restore the emphasis to the temporal cycle;
  - b) to reduce the number of feasts, by introducing the *memoria* for many saints;
  - c) to revise carefully and simplify historical passages;
  - d) to make a new choice of scripture readings, sermons, and homilies;
  - e) to eliminate the breaking up of the lessons into three sections,

—these are some of the ways reform could be achieved.

While still keeping traditional and essential elements, the Office would become not only a worthy one, but also a simple and fruitful one, full of tremendous spiritual value. Perhaps, too, freedom could be allowed, as formerly, for local variations, needs of particular churches and states of life, rather than the insistence on the material identity of the formulae.

But let us in all trust in the Church, knowing as we do that in this as in all other things she will not fail to consult the best interests of her sons and the needs of their souls.

## **Related Articles on Breviary Reform**

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