

# The Little Office of Baltimore



THE LITTLE  
OFFICE OF  
BALTIMORE

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE Divine Office is part of the official liturgy of the Church—as much so as Holy Mass. It is comprised of eight “Hours” that are said throughout the day: the night and morning Hours of Matins, Lauds, and Prime, the daytime hours of Terce, Sext, and None, and the evening hours of Vespers and Compline. Each hour is made up principally of Psalms from the Old Testament, surrounded by antiphons, canticles, hymns, responsories, and other prayers, as well as short readings on occasion. The Office goes all the way back to the Jewish custom of praying Psalms, and gradually took shape throughout the first millenium. St. Benedict of Nursia, in particular, was instrumental in establishing a sequence of psalms that helped define the Roman practice for centuries.

Although the Office is mostly said by priests and religious, it can be said by anyone, and indeed some of the most long-lasting and popular devotions of the Catholic laity either came directly from it or were inspired by it. The most common

medieval books that have survived to today are “Books of Hours”, which contained a simplified form of the Office known as the Little Office of Our Lady. Devout laypeople treasured their Books of Hours and prayed from them every day. And even those who could not afford such an expense or read it anyway were accustomed to saying 150 *Paternosters* or *Ave Marias*, one for each psalm. The modern Rosary, therefore, is in some way an extension of the Divine Office.

## THE LITTLE OFFICE OF BALTIMORE

The “Little Office of Baltimore” is a newly-coined term for a shortened English form of the Divine Office. It first appeared in the *Manual of Prayers* (1888) prepared and published by order of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, the same authority that produced the more well-known Baltimore Catechism. As originally constituted, it featured two English hours: *Prime*, for daily morning prayer, and *Compline*, for daily evening prayer. The Manual also printed an English-language *Office of the Dead* (Matins and Lauds), and



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a parallel Latin and English *Vespers for Sundays and feast days* throughout the year.

However, the Manual provided many additional Psalms throughout its pages, and even gives concrete suggestions on how to use these additional Psalms devotionally and quasi-liturgically throughout the year. These suggestions can be found on two tables that appeared on pages 218 and 219: *Psalms Suitable for Various Occasions*, and *Psalms Suitable for the Various Seasons*. A section of “Hymns and Sequences for the Church’s Seasons” offers a great deal of other liturgical material, including the hymns for Terce, Sext, and None. Also, beginning on page 665<sup>1</sup>, there is a section of “The Introits, Collects, Epistles, Gospels, and Postcommunions for the Sundays and Principal Feasts of the Year” that provides Collects, Chapters (from the Epistles) and Lessons (from the Gospels).

All of this extra liturgical material contained within the *Manual* can be used as a basis to expand the original material even further, and flesh

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<sup>1</sup> This section is not found in all editions of the *Manual of Prayer*.

PSALMS SUITABLE FOR THE VARIOUS  
SEASONS.

ADVENT, Ps. 84; CHRISTMAS, Ps. 83, 102; LENT,  
Ps. 4, 30, 39, 110, 115, and the *Seven Penitential  
Psalms*; EASTER, Ps. 15, 109, 117; ASCENSION, Ps.  
23, 102, 131; PENTECOST, Ps. 133, 150.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN.

Ps. 23, 109, 112, 121, 126, 147.

THE HOLY ANGELS.

Ps. 90, 102, 148.

THE CHURCH.

Ps. 121, 131, 147, 149.

FOR THE DEAD.

Ps. 5, 6, 7, 22, 24, 26, 39, 40, 41, 50, 62, 64, 129, 131, 137.

*The Seasonal and Festal Tables on page 219 of the Manual. The first section, containing the seasons from Advent to Pentecost, can be used as the basis for a seasonally varying Matins and weekday Vespers. Beneath that are three sets of psalms that can be used for festal offices of the Blessed Virgin, the Holy Angels, and the Church (i.e. the Saints).*

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out those hours not explicitly given in the book: Matins and Lauds for throughout the year; the minor hours of Terce, Sext, and None; and Vespers for weekdays. With this extra material we can construct a complete Little Office that can be used by the devout laity who wish to participate in the Church's daily prayer.

To be sure, there are many existing little offices for the laity—the 20th century saw quite a flourishing of examples. But the Baltimore Office nevertheless stands out as rather unique. First, it has a peculiarly and unmistakably American pedigree, recommended and promoted by the American bishops and cast in the English language<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, it precedes the extensive changes to the Divine Office that occurred throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century—including the revised psalter of Pius X and the modern Liturgy of the Hours. Thus, the Little Office of Baltimore still retains a strong connection to the traditional Roman Office that can be traced in its essentials all the way back to St.

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2 Although most medieval Books of Hours were written in Latin, a number have come down to us in Dutch, showing the antiquity of vernacular offices.

Benedict. It would be an impiety to undermine this deep historical connection, particularly as it is a refreshing change from the mania for novelty that has unfortunately come to characterize liturgical composition over the last few decades. Moreover, preserving that connection gives us the happy result of an office that is *both* American and traditional.

## DERIVATION OF THE EXPANDED HOURS

The Baltimore Office as given here is an expansion of that in the original *Manual*, and it would be fair to ask how much was reconstructed and how much was original. The answer will depend on the hour we are talking about. Prime, Compline, and Sunday Vespers are given here as they appeared in 1888—I have had no hand in those.

The hours of Matins, Lauds, the minor Hours, and weekday Vespers are modern reconstructions, though ones that follow the *Manual*'s own lead. The Office of the Dead provided some invariant material for Matins and Lauds, and the seasonal tables determined the psalms for those

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hours. Weekday Vespers follows the format of Sunday Vespers, to which additional material has been added. The Minor Hours presented the least existing material to work with, though even so, appropriate hymns and psalms were still contained in the *Manual*.

Overall, my working rule has been to stay as much as possible within the context of the Baltimore Manual and to resist pulling from outside sources. When I was forced to go outside the *Manual* for antiphons or other supplemental material, my source was the English translation of the Roman Breviary by the Marquis de Bute. And for all the hours, variations between weekdays have been avoided to keep the office compact and simple to use, as was originally intended by the compilers.

It was devising a sensible Psalter that proved the greatest challenge. A number of schemas were experimented with and then abandoned either as too complicated or too far afield from the Manual's suggestions. But in the end, a way was found to create a simple, workable office that also preserved the Manual's suggestions as closely as pos-

sible. First, the psalms were categorized in two groups, based on their position in the pre-1910 salter: psalms 1-108 and 148-150 were classified as morning psalms and assigned to Matins, and those from 109 to 147 were classified as evening ones and assigned to weekday Vespers (Sunday Vespers already having been provided for). Then, in order to avoid excessive repetition, psalms that already saw daily use in other hours were left out.

To see how these principles worked in practice, it will be useful to investigate each of the hours and then each season and common individually.

## MATINS

Most of the fixed text of Matins like the Invitatory has been adapted, with appropriate modifications, from the Matins of the Dead, with some additions from the other Hours. The Psalms have been assigned based on the Manual's "Psalms suitable for the various seasons", as shown on page 10.

There was every intention, at first, to have three Psalms and Lessons for each season, which would thus make up a proper Nocturn. But this rule proved unworkable. The Manual gives different

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numbers of psalms for each season but almost never enough morning ones for a full Nocturn. Additional psalms could certainly have been selected and added, but then we would be straying a little too far from the schema outlined in the tables.

Since generally only one or two morning psalms were recommended per season that weren't already spoken for elsewhere, Matins was given a truncated "nocturne" of just one seasonal psalm. This psalm is to be said every day at Matins during the season. In keeping with the seasonal nature of this hour, an appropriate lesson was then selected from the Sunday Gospel readings.

These reconstructed Matins are thus quite a great deal shorter than the full Roman Matins, which is the most lengthy office of all. But this result seems entirely appropriate for an office designed for the laity. In any case, if a fuller liturgy is desired at any point, the votive offices in Section IV can easily be made to replace the seasonal psalm.

## LAUDS

Lauds, like Matins, received its fixed text and

structure from the Manual's Lauds of the Dead, but without psalms 149 and 150. Since these are recommended in the table for "The Church" and for Pentecost, they have been reassigned to those uses instead. Also, the Canticle for the Office of the Dead (the Song of Hezekiah) has been replaced with that for Sunday, the *Benedicite* (also called the Song of the Three Children), which is printed in the Manual on page 327 under devotions for Holy Communion. Finally, Lauds ends with the proper Collect of the day, as it does in the Office of the Dead, without any commemorations or final antiphon.

## PRIME

As Prime was one of the original offices printed in the Manual, it has been reprinted here with no change. Note that in the original pre-1910 Roman Office, the second psalm of Prime varied throughout the week: 117 on Sunday, 118 on Saturday, and 21-25 from Monday to Friday. The compilers of the Baltimore Office eliminated this variable psalm completely for the sake of simplicity, so in their version the only Psalms said at Prime are 53



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and part of 118. Also note that Prime does not take a special Collect for the day, but has an invariant one used throughout the year.

## TERCE, SEXT, & NONE THE MINOR HOURS

The *Manual* does not give any of these hours in full, though the hymns proper to Terce, Sext and None are printed in the section on the *Hymns and Sequences of the Church's Seasons*, on pages 599-601. Traditionally, the Psalms for these hours would have come from parts of the extensive Psalm 118. However, those sections of Psalm 118 proper to the minor hours do not appear in the *Manual*. In their place I have simply assigned to these hours the three psalms listed under "Prayer for Deliverance" (7, 24, and 85), which seem to fit the middle of the day and are not in regular use elsewhere. Appropriate antiphons have been selected out of these to highlight the events of the Passion: at Terce the judgment before Pilate, at Sext the crucifixion, and at None the death of Christ. The collect used in the minor hours is the daily one. These hours conclude with a shortened

and invariant Chapter and Responsories, after the style of the Little Office of Our Lady.

## VESPERS

Vespers for Sundays and major feasts are already set out exactly in the Manual, with the appropriate seasonal and festal psalms each given a letter name (A, B, C, D, E, etc.), and then referred to by letter at the appropriate feast. The letter references I have abandoned, as they require more flipping back and forth of pages than was advisable; instead I have simply printed the psalms in full in the propers. Otherwise, though, the schema of the *Manual* was retained.

Weekday psalms are given for the first time here, as they provide an excellent opportunity to use the evening psalms recommended for each season. But for Vespers, unlike Matins, it seemed best not to reduce the number of psalms, even when only one or two evening psalms were listed. Instead, a standard set of 5 psalms were chosen as the ordinary base of weekday Vespers for the entire year. These are taken from those recommended for Thanksgiving (116) and for the

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Church (121, 131, 147, 149). These five are used throughout the liturgical green time after Epiphany as well as after Pentecost, and they are also used in Septuagesima. But in the other seasons, one or more of these ordinary Psalms is swapped out with seasonal psalms chosen from the table. The Little Chapter in Vespers is taken from the first line of the Epistle, as given in the Mass propers on page 665 ff.

## COMPLINE

As in Prime, the Office of Compline given here is a straightforward reprinting of the version contained in the *Manual*. Moreover, it is worth noting that the Baltimore version is essentially the same as the full Roman Office of Compline prior to the 1910 reform—which likewise had the same 4 psalms (4, 30, 90, and 133) repeated every day throughout the week.

Having looked in turn at all the hours, we now address the morning and evening propers for each season.

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## ADVENT

The only psalm recommended for Advent is 84, which was assigned to Matins. Since the Manual does not recommend any evening psalm for the season, an appropriate one has been assigned from the Vespers of the BVM (109) on the coming of the Messiah.

## CHRISTMAS and EPIPHANY

Two psalms are suggested for Christmas: 83 and 102, and they are both in the morning range. Moreover, there are no psalms whatsoever suggested for Epiphany. It seemed best to therefore use 83 in Matins from Christmas until Epiphany and then 102 from Epiphany to Septuagesima Sunday.

There are effectively no weekday Vespers during the Christmas octave and to January 4<sup>th</sup>; the Vespers of the feast are simply repeated, with the exception of the feast of the Circumcision, which has its own proper psalms. For weekday Vespers during Epiphany psalm 137 has been selected, which features the line “Let all the kings of the earth give glory unto Thee”.