

A Norbertine Spirituality of the Choral Divine Office

By Graham Golden, O. Praem.

6. **A** 32. Alma Redemptoris.
L-
ma * Red-emptó-ris Ma-ter, quæ
pérvi-a cœ-li por-ta ma-nes, et stel-la ma-ris, suc-
cúrre cadén-ti, súrge-re qui cu-rat pópu-lo : Tu quæ
genu-í-sti, na-tú-ra mi-rán-te tu-um sanctum Ge-ni-
tó-rem. Vir-go pri-us ac posté-ri-us, Gabri-é-
lis ab o-re sumens il-lud A-ve, pecca-tó-rum mi-se-ré-re.

What follows pertains to our spiritual practice of the choral Divine Office, a most important aspect of our life as Canons Regular of Prémontré. The use of the term “practice” in this reflection speaks of our daily execution of the Divine Office as a spiritual practice or activity. It does not connote a musical rehearsal.

Setting the Stage

I feel a quick review of the *Vision Statement of the Order of Prémontré* from the 2006 General Chapter provides a fitting background for the following reflection.

Drawn by our merciful and Triune God, we are called as baptized to follow the poor and risen Christ in a radical and apostolic way of life according to the Gospel, the Rule of St. Augustine and the charism of St. Norbert, founder of our Premonstratensian Order.

Our way of life is marked by a lifelong seeking after God through fraternal community, a never-ending conversion by giving ourselves to the Church of our profession in communion with the self-emptying of Christ, in imitation of Mary pondering God's Word, and in ceaseless prayer and service at the altar.

From the choir and the altar we go to serve the human family in a spirit of simplicity, hospitality, reconciliation and peace for the benefit of the Church and the world, especially where Christ is found among the poor, the suffering and among those who do not know him.

We pray that what God's spirit has begun in us may be made perfect in the day of Christ Jesus.

The Context of our Practice

What seems to be a tendency in all forms of religious life is compartmentalization of spiritual tasks. Some orders and congregations have made compartmentalization an aspect of their charism. They may have a particularly ministerial thrust, some so detailed as to specify the type and form of ministry which define who they are. That, then, becomes the focus of their religious life. For others it may be their liturgical life of prayer and for others it may be their individual and personal journey with and to God.

We as Canons Regular of Prémontré lead a life that is and should be all but compartmentalized. Still, it is human to be drawn to segregate a certain practice from other components of life. Our life pulls together in balance and tension all fundamental aspects of Christian spirituality. We are not monks, but parts of our life and prayer appear as though we are. We are not friars, but the way we minister might say otherwise. We are not canons in a secular sense, but we maintain the liturgy and life of the Church as they do. We are not solitary, but our private lives of contemplation hold

great importance. We are not a biological family, but we uphold, support and depend on one another as though we were. Through this complex web of religious tendencies we seek to, as the Rule of St. Augustine opens by saying, “love God above all things...and then love our neighbor.”

Our life is one of a holistic response to the call of God to live this unique journey of religious life. All aspects feed into one another. Through this hybridity that characterizes our lives as we follow in the footsteps of the earliest Christians, we demonstrate that no one aspect of the Christian experience takes precedence because they all lead from and toward something else. Like the tenants of our Catholic faith, our life is a delicate balance that when one aspect is removed or shifted others will inevitably crumble or fail. It is a domino effect.

The Reflection

Our liturgical life as Norbertines is not just another thing to do in the day, but it is an aspect of our life that helps maintain the balance of priorities and obligations in our lives. Liturgy as ritual is the one controlled and structured (two terms I use loosely!) environment throughout the day to which we can come together as one community and as a group of individuals and “practice” our life and our faith. It is the point of preparation, the essential distillation and the culmination of all other aspects of our life.

The Divine Office in and of itself serves many functions within the Church and within our lives. It is our ability as human beings to sanctify the temporal order by coming together each morning and evening to mark the passing of time cyclically, linearly and ultimately liturgically. It is our chance to praise God in the morning and to give him thanks in the evening. It is our chance to encounter the Word of God in the psalms, canticles and daily readings. The Divine Office is the official prayer of the Church and we are mandated to say it, rather to sing it as we are canons. In addition to all of these beautiful and true realities of the Divine Office, to practice it with sung voices together adds an entirely new dimension to this practice as it fundamentally seeks to enliven and en flesh our own Norbertine and Augustinian spiritualities. For us as canons, choral Divine Office is also a pillar of Norbertine tradition.

We do not practice the choral office simply because it is what Norbertines “do” as a pillar of our life and because it is what we are bound to by the Church. Rather, it is a pillar of our life and what the Church calls us to because it is a central spiritual practice reflecting and edifying how we live and express our spirituality, our connection to God. It is not our practice because it is our tradition, it is our tradition because it is our practice.

To be Lovers of Spiritual Beauty

The choral office is indeed a *practice* and we approached it as such. It is not a performance. A wise conductor once told me that every good performance is simply a rehearsal, a chance to literally “re-hear” or “re-experience” the music. Our daily coming together in the morning and evening is one more chance to re-experience and experience anew our life in community and to give us that opportunity to once more strive to enter into those spiritual graces that lead, inevitably, to a beautiful “performance” because we are again together embarking on that chance to ritually express the life we strive to live throughout the rest of the day together, alone and in ministry.

As a community that has grown from the profound spiritual seeds of St. Augustine we are called to be “lovers of spiritual beauty,” to “give forth the good odor of Christ.” Our liturgies and communal spiritual expressions are one context in which we come to love spiritual beauty and through which we can exude the deep spirituality we strive to imbue in our daily life. It is also through the practice of the choral Divine Office that we grow as “one heart and one mind on our way into God.”

When we embark on that journey to God well, we become lovers of spiritual beauty. It is then that we give forth the good odor of Christ. Our continued striving toward a beautiful, well executed and aesthetically pleasing choral office is not because we want our guests to leave and say “they sing so well!” The choral office is not “art for art's sake.” We seek the beauty of it because the closer we come to expressing that beauty, the closer we are drawn to our spirituality. The ultimate end of singing the Divine Office in community is spiritual. When the spirituality of the practice is lived out to the highest extent possible, the aesthetic reality of it, musicality and precision follows naturally. These are not the goals, but rather the fruit of such a practice.

The more strongly we give ourselves spiritually to the practice of the choral office, which expresses its foundational purpose in our common life, the more beautiful it becomes. That is the wonder of Gregorian Chant and music from most spiritual traditions. It is the collection of largely untrained voices uniting in a common goal that is ultimately transcendent. The mystery and beauty of such practices are not necessarily found in the composition, musical creativity etc. but rather in the *spiritual passion of the execution*. Again, the execution is not in and of itself the goal but signifies a group reaching toward that goal. For us that goal is God and our journey together in Christ to the Father.

Both those participating in a spiritual act and those observing can sense if it is a

performance or a spiritual practice. Something may be empirically well executed, a brilliant performance “by the book” but only when it is practiced with the energy of a spirituality will it “give forth the good odor of Christ” even if the execution is not as objectively perfect.

In our practice of the choral office the notion of an objective perfection in the execution should be avoided. The notes on the page are what they are and we all attempt to meet the demands they give to us. What is more important, however, is to practice the communal spirituality of the office well. Then, even if the objective execution is wanting, aesthetic and spiritual beauty can be had.

To be of One Heart and One Mind on the Way into God

In our vow formula we “...offer and give [ourselves] to the Church [community] and...promise a conversion of [our] ways and life in community...” thus setting upon the task of “growing as one heart and one mind on the way to God,” striving to live the *vita apostolica* sharing *all things* in common through self-emptying or *kenosis*. The choral office is a spiritual bedrock of this *kenosis*. It is the “practice field”, the daily activity in which we strive to no longer be “I” but to be “we” and for that “we” to grow in unity as it recognizes its dignity as the mystical body of Christ. Just as our Eucharistic celebrations are not the end but the beginning of our life in the encounter with and service to Christ, so is the choral office that context in which we learn to die to self, give who we are to the community and strive to unite ourselves to our brethren and God. It is then from the choir that we can go forth to recognize the unity for which we strive.

Through this practice of singing together we grow in detachment from our own wants and desires. It also brings about a greater awareness of those around us. It requires a “sacred listening” to the movements, breathing, pitch, phrasing and volume of those that surround us. It fosters an attentiveness and responsiveness to our brethren.

This attentiveness also requires a growing detachment from, tolerance of and compassion toward imperfections in others. It calls us to a gentleness and maybe even to a kind fraternal correction from time to time as we all strive to move forward toward God as one voice, as one community, as one Church. This task calls us day by day to be more aware and mindful of ourselves and our community members. It does not, however, call us to do so at the risk of losing sight of our prayer to praise our creator. Such mindful attentiveness should only deepen that reality and all the other spiritual characteristics of the Divine Office mentioned above (the encounter with the word of God, the sanctifying of the temporal order, the universal official prayer of the Church, etc.)

Synchronized activities have in all cultures and through all ages been recognized as great tools for building unity. They have nearly always been foundational for religious life and for religion. They find great meaning and build camaraderie in military institutions, fraternities, and indigenous cultures. My norbertine brother Stephen once said something to the effect that “we shouldn't be too cool to do the little things well.” Beyond just our singing, our gestures and motions, our bows, our standing and our sitting, our processing etc. all serve to help bring us together and make us more aware of one another and of God. The true advantage we have as religious people over many groups that participate in other forms of ritualized behavior is that ours come from and point to something greater than our just our community and institution. It points to the divine mystery toward which we all strive.

If we can seek to be channels of grace in such a context of praise, then we can do the same at table, while watching television, walking with one another through the struggles of life or even performing mundane tasks on behalf of the community. Importantly, we can do the same while encountering the larger world as ministers to the People of God. The choral Divine Office is also the place where we can come to share a level of intimacy that only joined voices in praise of our God can express to elucidate and confirm the love and respect that grows through our life at table and in community.

Our seeking after spiritual beauty is integral to our search for unity with God and neighbor. It is through the practice of the Divine Office that we can come to sing in one voice of praise and thanksgiving to our creator and find a place of balance in our lives. It is in the context of the Divine Office that we as Canons Regular of Prémontré glimpse the divine mystery. We sense the divine mystery in the “odor of Christ” expressed through a spiritual beauty manifesting in unity. We seek unity in God and to bring that unity of renewal, wholeness, healing and salvation into a darkened world. As our vespers liturgies begin, “Jesus Christ is the light of the World, a light no darkness can extinguish.”

