

From Behind the Abbey Walls: The Divine Office

As the weather turns colder, the trees are losing their leaves, which combine in various ratios of orange, yellow, and red. My favorite times of day are in the morning and evening as the sun rises and sets behind the hills, drawing whatever colors remain on the grounds out of hiding.

As you can tell, novices have time to spare to silence. As one of the brothers said of this period of initial formation is, "Your only next thing is prayer." The monks gather four times a day in community to pray: morning, midday, evening, and night. Every hour begins with the verse, "O God come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me," in order to call for divine aid as we begin our prayer. After a hymn, we will recite, chant, or sing three or four of the Psalms, the set of 150 prayers in the Old Testament of the Bible. These prayers comprise the Liturgy of the Hours, pausing to pray at certain hours of the day in order to remind ourselves of God's continual presence.

The Psalms are part of our tradition, stretching far back into the Jewish roots of Christianity. The Psalms express every sentiment the human heart has experienced: "joy, gratitude, thanksgiving, love, tenderness, enthusiasm, but also intense suffering, complaint, please for help and for justice, which sometimes lead to anger and imprecation (cursing)" according to an audience St. JP II gave in 2001. If you think the Bible is full of reassuring, feel good verses, I challenge you to go check out Psalm 88. The Jewish people prayed these same psalms in the temple, at certain hours of the day, and Jesus would have done so, himself. In fact, some of Jesus's last words come directly from the Psalms: "Lord, why have you forsaken me," a verse spoken from the cross, is the opening verse of Psalm 22. This intense psalm of suffering is followed by a psalm usually sung at funerals, "the Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want." The Psalms convey all emotions, which I think is one reason why they have remained at the center of our prayer life as Christians.

Monks and other communities of religious are called to pray these hours especially for the universal Church. That call to pray is both a privilege and a responsibility. The monastic life is meant to protect times for prayer. All Christians need to work to keep time for prayer, and that looks differently whether that Christian is a monk, married, single and working, dating, etc. A common theme in monastic life is that we do what all Christians do in an especially dedicated and public way. By setting aside specific times for prayer, for instance, we invite the lay faithful of the community to join us creating that sign of the Church praying together.

If you can, I encourage you to visit us for Vespers and Mass at 5:00PM on Weekdays so you can experience this for yourself. Otherwise, know that four times a day the monks gather to pray for you and your needs.