

VIGILIA DE DOMINA

A MARIAN PRAYER-WATCH OF THE SERVANTS OF MARY

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INTRODUCTION

1. The Vigil is one of the oldest and most characteristic devotions which the Servants address to St. Mary, their Lady. It is presented here in two forms: the first, *St. Mary, Lady of her Servants*, is the traditional text; the second, entitled *St. Mary, Servant of the Lord*, is new. It is the result of postconciliar reflection and piety by the Servants.

I. THE TRADITIONAL FORM

An uninterrupted tradition

2. The first chapter of the *Constitutiones antiquae*, entitled *De reverentiis beatæ Mariæ Virginis*, contains the following norm:

The Vigil of our Lady should be said each evening with three readings and two responsories, and after the third reading the *Salve Regina* is said; but on Fridays two candles are lighted. The Vigil on that day is said as on a feast of a double rank.¹

¹ Monumenta OSM 1(1897) p.28: “Vigilia de Domina nostra quolibet sero dicatur cum tribus lectionibus et duobus responsoriis, et post tertiam lectionem *Salve Regina*; sed die veneris dicatur sicut in duplici festo; et accendantur duo luminaria.”

From this it appears that in the communities of the Servants the Vigil was a communal celebration each evening, but was solemnized on Friday, the vigil of Saturday, our Lady's day. From the end of the thirteenth century, until our own day, that norm has remained substantially intact notwithstanding numerous changes

in legislation. The Constitutions of 1940 prescribed:

Each evening the Vigil of our Lady is said with three readings and two responsories, and after the third reading... the *Salve Regina* is said.²

The Constitutions of 1977, the Order's expression of postconciliar legislative renewal, describe the Vigil as “the traditional homage”:

The Servants have honored Saint Mary as their Lady with particular acts of reverence: greeting her with the angelic salutation at the beginning of their community gatherings; offering the traditional homage of her Vigil; dedicating their churches to her; celebrating her feasts with solemnity and calling her to mind in a special way on Saturday and at the close of each day.³

The Constitutions undoubtedly have the Vigil in mind when they exhort communities “to express devotion to Mary by drawing on practices from our living tradition.”⁴

Origin and nature

3. The *Vigilia de Domina* was not composed by the Friar Servants of Mary nor was it originally a prayer found only in our Order. It was used in substantially the same form by other religious orders which arose prior to our own.

Historical research has not yet determined the origins of the *Vigilia de Domina* with certainty. They can be placed, however, within the context of the Marian piety which developed among religious orders between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, first in monastic communities and then in mendicant fraternities.

4. The composition of “little offices” is a typical expression of the Marian piety of this period. These were originally intended to celebrate the Virgin on Saturday, the day traditionally dedicated to her.

It is probable that the origins of the Vigil go back to the tradition of dedicating Saturday to our Lady; the remembrance would include the celebration of the Mass of Saint Mary and the Little Office. The Vigil then became an office to be recited on the evening before Saturday.

5. The title of this short office seems to reflect the two ways in which the term “vigil” was used in the liturgical language of the period. The older usage referred to the office proper, to “vigils” or night offices, while later usage referred to the day before a feast and the prayers which preceded the celebration.

Prayer of the Servants

² *Constitutiones Ordinis Fratrum Servorum beatæ Mariæ Virginis I. De reverentiis beatæ Mariæ* (Vicenza 1940) p. 18: “Dicatur etiam quolibet vespere *vigilia Dominae nostræ* cum tribus lectionibus et duobus responsoriis; post tertiam vero lectionem [...] dicatur *Salve Regina* [...]”

³ Chapter I “The Servants of Mary,” art. 6, in *Constitutions Order of Friar Servants of Mary* (Rome, 1977).

⁴ *Ibid.*, art. 7.

6. With the passing of centuries, the Vigil has become a prayer form proper to us Servants of Mary, our characteristic homage to the Virgin. We can say this for a number of reasons: the very early date at which it was adopted; the love with which it has been preserved and passed on; the significance which has been attached to it as a prayer of thanksgiving for the approval of the Order⁵ and distinctive symbol of our Marian piety; the great esteem in which it has been held by our authors and the friars of every age; and finally, the fact that ours is the only mendicant order which has continuously mentioned and recommended the Vigil in its various constitutional texts down to the present day.

Structure

7. Similar to other vigils, which have neither introductory verses nor a hymn, ours begins immediately with the antiphon *Benedicta tu*, by which it is commonly known. The Vigil of Our Lady consists essentially of three psalms, three reading-prayers, and the greater antiphon, *Salve Regina*.

The Psalms

8. The psalms of the Vigil — Psalm 8 (*Domine, Dominus noster*), Psalm 19 (*Caeli enarrant*) and Psalm 24 (*Domini est terra*) — are those of the first nocturn of the Common of the Blessed Virgin and almost all of the Marian feasts of the Roman Breviary before Vatican II.

This arrangement dates from at least the ninth century. In fact, the three psalms with their antiphons (*Benedicta tu*, *Sicut myrra*, and *Ante torum*) are found in the first nocturn for the feast of February 2nd in the oldest antiphonal that has come down to us, the Romano-Gallican *Antiphonale Compediense*,⁶ edited between 860 and 880. In its turn, this arrangement is dependent on that found as early as the eighth century in the Roman liturgy for the solemnity of Christmas.⁷

In order to understand the “Marian sense” of the psalms of the Vigil it is therefore necessary to place them in the context of the liturgical celebration of the Incarnation of the Word and his Birth of the Virgin.

⁵ In *Chronicon rerum totius sacri Ordinis Nervorum beatae Marine Virginis*, Fra Michele Poccianti (d. 1576) lists the following among the events of the year 1258: “The good news (i.e. the news of three concessions granted to the Order by Alexander IV (died 1261) which could be interpreted as virtual approval of the Order) was delivered to the fathers of Monte Senario as they were singing the verse *Monstra te esse Matrem*. Accordingly they decreed that in the future both choirs would sing the verse together. In memory of this great gift, they added that they would recite before compline three psalms and three readings in honor of the Virgin.” [«Quod bonum nuntium, cum esset delatum patribus sacri montis Senarii, quando psallebant illum versiculum, *Monstra te esse Matrem*, propterea decreverunt in futurum utrumque chorum illum versiculum simul decantaturum; addiderunt quin etiam ob huius beneficii immensi memoriam, quod ante completorium tres psalmi cum tribus lectionibus in honorem Virginis singulis diebus dicerentur» (Monumenta OSM 15 (1915) p. 46)]. This account has the characteristic of a pious legend. Even prescindendo from some errors which Poccianti makes relative to the dating of Alexander IV's letters, the episode is not found in the sources which have come down to us. This tradition explains the rubric which introduces all printed editions of the Vigil including the latest editio typica of 1964: “From the beginning of the Order it was recited to thank God for the confirmation of the Order.” [«Ab initio Religionis nostrae recitata fuit, ad gratias Deo agendas pro Ordinis confirmatione»].

⁶ Cf. HESBERT R.J., *Corpus Antiphonarium Officii 1.* = Rerum ecclesiasticarum documenta. Series maior. Fontes VII (Herder, Roma 1963) p. 114.

⁷ Cf. FRENAUD G., *Le culte de Notre Dame dans l'ancienne liturgie latine*, in: AA.VV., *Maria. Études sur la Sainte Vierge 6* (Beauchesne, Paris 1961) pp. 201-209.

9. Psalm 8. This psalm, which sings of the majesty of the Lord and human dignity, has been interpreted in a Christological sense since the time of the apostles. As already mentioned, in the Romano-Gallican liturgical tradition it became the first psalm of the vigil for the Feast of the Purification of St. Mary, the final celebration of the Christmas cycle.

The question, full of admiration and wonder, which the psalmist asks and leaves open—“what is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him?” (v. 5)—finds its answers in the Christmas liturgy: the man whom the psalmist praises is the Christ, born of Mary, the perfect man, the new Adam whom the Father has crowned with glory and honor (cf. v. 6; *Heb 2: 5-9*) and made Lord of all things (cf. v. 7; *1 Cor 15: 25-27; Eph 1: 22*).

Mary, therefore, is the mother of the “Son of Man,” our brother and Savior. She is the Mother of him who “fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”⁸

10. Psalm 19 AB. In the liturgical and patristic tradition of the West, Psalm 19 AB, “a hymn to God, the Creator of the Universe and Lord of the Law,” is regularly used to celebrate the mystery of the Incarnation and Birth.⁹ Note in particular v. 6:

There he has placed a tent for the sun; it comes forth like a bridegroom coming from his tent, rejoices like a champion to run its course.

The Fathers saw here an allegory of the Incarnation: the spousal union within the womb of Mary of the divine nature of the Word and human nature. Mary is the tent which the Father prepared for Christ, the Sun of Justice; she is the bridegroom's tent in which the Word is united to man. It is from her, as from a bridal chamber, that Christ comes forth to run his course, that is, to complete the work of redemption given him by his Father.

11. Psalm 24. This is truly a liturgical psalm for two choirs. It is perhaps taken from the ancient ritual for receiving the Ark into the Temple. Certainly it is from the ceremonial for the reception of pilgrims. The choir of pious pilgrims arrives at the Temple and requests to enter; the choir of Temple custodians responds.

In the Latin tradition Psalm 24 is characteristic of Advent:¹⁰ the liturgy interprets the psalm (vv. 7-10) as a prophetic announcement of the Incarnation of the Word and uses it to celebrate the coming of the Son of God into the world.

In this liturgical reading of the psalm, Mary is the gate through which the “King of Glory” (cf. vv. 7-10) entered the world. One can go even further: just as the Temple which received the Ark became the symbol of the mysterious presence of God, so too, Mary who received the Word of God into her heart and womb became the holy dwelling place, the unique temple of the divinity.

The Reading-prayers

⁸ VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22.

⁹ Since at least the seventh century, the Roman liturgy has sung Psalm 19 during the night office of the solemnity of December 25; this is true of the offices proper to St. Mary Major's and St. Peter's (cf. AMALARIUS, *Liber de ordine antiphonarii*, XV, *De Nativitate Domini*: I.M. Hanssens, *Amalarii episcopi opera liturgica omnia*, Citta del Vaticano, 1950, vol. III, pp. 49-50 (*Studi e testi*, 140); *Antiphonarius*, (In *Vigilia Nativitatis Domini*), PL 78, 733).

In the Liturgy of the Hours published by Paul VI, Psalm 19 A is found in the Office of Readings of the two principle celebrations of the Incarnation-Birth of the Lord: the solemnities of March 25 and December 25.

¹⁰ In the ancient Roman antiphonal, parts of Psalm 24 are found in the celebrations most characteristic of Advent: the Mass for Wednesday of Ember Week and the Mass of December 24th (*Liber antiphonarius*, PL 78, 643, 645). In the present Roman Liturgy, Psalm 24 still occurs at significant moments during Advent: Entrance Antiphon on December 22nd and the Responsorial Psalm of the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Cycle A, and December 20th.

12. According to the traditional arrangement, the three psalms are followed by three readings. It has often been noted that here the readings are actually three short prayers.

The three readings of our Vigil (1. *Sancta Maria, virgo virginum*; 2. *Sancta Maria, piarum piissima*; 3. *Sancta Dei Genetrix*) are found in the same order and with the same responsories in an eleventh century liturgical book of the Parisian Abbey of Saint-Germain des Prés.¹¹

The three prayers are addressed directly to the Virgin and were composed for a monastic community celebration. They all appear to have been edited according to the same literary criteria and they reflect a common cultural background and similar content. They would thus seem to be the work of a single author or at least of one monastic school.

The image of St. Mary which emerges from these prayers is that of the Virgin Mother: glorious and gentle, powerful and merciful, near to both God and man. Mother of the “King of Kings” and seated next to her Son in glory, she presents her virginal prayer for her devoted servants who have gone astray and are weighed down by their condition as sinners.

The “Salve Regina”

13. The Vigil of Our Lady ends with the singing of the *Salve Regina* and the oration *Omnipotens sempiterne Deus*. This is not the only known conclusion to the Vigil. In other versions used outside the Order, the Vigil at times concluded with the hymn *Te Deum*.¹²

The reason for substituting the *Salve* for the *Te Deum* seems to have been to accentuate the Marian character of the short office. The substitution was accepted by the Servants of Mary from the time they first adopted the Vigil.

Therefore, the *Benedicta tu* concludes with the singing of the most famous Marian antiphon of the Middle Ages.

14. The *Salve Regina*, written in the eleventh century by an unknown author, was originally an expression of monastic piety but was quickly adopted by the mendicant orders. It became popular among the laity and had an important place in the liturgy.

With regard to content, the *Salve* is at one and the same time a greeting, a cry, and a prayer of supplication.

— It is a greeting of servants to the Queen of Mercy, a solemn salutation expressed in a literary form that places the same word at the beginning and end of the first stanza: *Salve, Regina... spes nostra, salve*.

— It is a cry in the biblical-liturgical sense of the pleading of an oppressed people that rises to heaven (cf. *Ex* 2: 23; 3: 9). It is the cry of servants oppressed by the knowledge of their sin and weeping in a land of exile. They address their Advocate—in the feudal sense of the term—seeking her intervention so that they might be freed and return to their homeland.

— It is a prayer of supplication to the Mother of Jesus that, “after this exile,” she might show her servants the Son, “the blessed fruit” of her womb.

15. The *Salve Regina* is a typical expression of medieval piety because of its language, the cultic and social attitudes it reflects and the theological concepts upon which it is based. It is a product of the eleventh century which has been called “the great century of Marian piety.”

Even though it is a medieval prayer the *Salve* expresses perennial religious values: the awareness of the need for mercy and of being in a “land of exile” even though the world is a place where the

¹¹ Cf. LECLERCQ J., *Fragmenta mariana*, in: *Ephemerides Liturgicæ* 72(1958) pp. 294-297.

¹² See, for example, the *Officium quod «Benedicta» nuncupatur*, published by D.M. MONTAGNA: *Cinquecento devoto minore. L'Ufficio della «benedetta» ed altre preci in un opuscolo di origine francescana attorno al 1525*, in: *Studi Storici OSM* 23 (1973) pp. 267-269.

kingdom is to be built; the desire to see the face of Christ; and the confident recourse to the Mother of the Lord to whom God has given a particular mission of intercession for his people. The *Salve Regina* has come down through the centuries and has been loved by generations of praying Christians because of the truth of its content, its genuine religious sentiment, and its poetic inspiration. It was the prayer of the first Servants and, changes of time and culture notwithstanding, it is our prayer today.

Value and meaning

16. The love and esteem of the Servants of Mary for this brief office originated because of the intrinsic and familiar values which the Vigil represents and expresses.

—The *intrinsic* value derives from the harmony of the various elements, the inspired origin of the psalms, the beauty of the antiphons and responsories, the richness of the reading-prayers, and the intense religious sentiments of the *Salve Regina*.

—The *familiar* value is that of household treasures that are preserved with love and passed on as a precious heritage, reflecting the feelings of many generations. Since at least the final decades of the thirteenth century, the time of St. Philip and St. Alexis, the Vigil has been in use within the Order and has remained unchanged in form. In celebrating it we enter into a communion that transcends the limits of space and time:

—a communion with all Servants of Mary— friars, nuns, sisters, and laity—who in all parts of the world use the *Benedicta tu* as a shared homage to the Virgin and a simple, but effective bond of fraternity;

—a communion which extends also to the generations of brothers and sisters who have lived before us in the service of St. Mary and who made this prayerful homage a sign of their faithful dedication to their Lady.

II. THE NEW FORM

Origins

17. This new form responds to a desire to offer a homage to the Virgin in the traditional structure of the Vigil of Our Lady while giving expression to the Marian piety of the Servants as found in the new Constitutions.¹³

18. The Gospel images which inspired the choice of the psalms and the composition of the reading-prayers are the following: the Virgin of the Incarnation by whose *fiat* we learn to hear the Word of God and to be aware of the call of the Spirit;¹⁴ the Virgin of the *Magnificat* who invites us to vigorously support individuals and society itself in their struggle to be free;¹⁵ the Virgin at the foot of the cross who guides and supports us in our commitment of service.¹⁶

Structure

19. This form of the Vigil, St. Mary, Servant of the Lord, consists of an introduction, three psalms, three reading-prayers and a closing supplication.

¹³ Cf. *Constitutions O.S.M.*, (Rome, 1977) art. 7.

¹⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, art. 6.

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, art. 7.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, art. 319.

20. The introduction includes two verses of praise and invitation and a suitable Marian hymn. The first verse is Elizabeth's greeting to Mary: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (*Lk* 1: 42). As a result, the new form begins with the same words as the traditional Vigil: *Benedicta tu*.

The second verse is an invitation to praise the Lord for the great things he has accomplished in his humble Servant (cf. *Lk* 1: 49).

[The hymn included in the original Italian text is omitted in this translation. Any suitable Marian hymn may be sung.]

The Psalms

21. The arrangement of the psalms in this form of the Vigil is original: Psalm 111 (*Confitebor Domino*), Psalm 113 (*Laudate, pueri Domini*), and Psalm 146 (*Lauda, anima mea, Dominum*). They are wisdom psalms of praise which express spiritual attitudes and themes which reappear in a sublimated way in the Canticle of the Virgin.

22. *Psalm 111.* This psalm is a meditation praising the divine works: "Great are the works of the Lord" (v. 2), "Majestic and glorious his work" (v. 3), "He has shown his might to his people" (v. 6), "His works are justice and truth" (v. 7). These works are God's intervention in the history of salvation. The psalmist praises above all else the Covenant of Sinai, the manifestation of the fidelity and mercy of the Lord:

(he) keeps his covenant ever in mind (v. 5)

...

He has sent deliverance to his people
and established his covenant for ever (v. 7).

The Virgin's Canticle, also, is a celebration of what the Lord has done for Israel and a remembrance of his mercy:

He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever (*Lk* 1: 54-55).

But it is also a glorification of the Almighty for the "great things" he has accomplished in Mary.

The Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy in his name (*Lk* 1: 49).

In this vigil office, the communities of the Servants sing Psalm 111, giving thanks to God with all their heart (cf. v. 1) for the gifts of grace he has poured out on Mary: her immaculate conception, the divine maternity, the association in the redemptive work of her Son, and the full glorification of her person.

23. *Psalm 113.* This psalm, the first of the Hallel series (Psalms 113-118), is a hymn to the greatness and mercy of God. Its thematic and spiritual similarities to the Magnificat are evident: the psalmist praises the glory of God who "from the dust lifts up the lowly, from his misery he raises the poor" (v. 7). This is also what Mary celebrates in her Canticle:

He has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

...

and (he) has lifted up the lowly (*Lk* 1: 48, 52).

Psalm 113 appears in Evening Prayer I of Sunday of the Third Week in the psalter and the liturgy invites us to sing it in the light of Luke 1:52, “He has cast down the mighty and has lifted up the lowly.” The Psalm is especially characteristic of Marian feasts; it is the first psalm of Evening Prayer I of the Common of the Blessed Virgin.

For us Servants, to sing Psalm 113 means opening ourselves to the divine paradox and conforming our lives to it: the Most High has looked upon the lowly with favor. Further, it means that we praise the Most High because he has raised up Mary of Nazareth, the humble and poor Virgin, has given her a home (the Church) and gladdens her heart with children (v. 9).

24. *Psalm 146.* This psalm is a hymn of praise to God powerful and merciful, faithful and provident. It is a song of the poor of Yahweh who “put no trust in princes, in mortal men in whom there is no help” (v. 3), but “whose hope is in the Lord their God who alone made heaven and earth (v. 6).

The psalm reviews the merciful works which God accomplishes for the poor and the unhappy. The psalmist glorifies God because:

(He) is just to those who are oppressed.

It is he who gives bread to the hungry (v. 7)

...

but thwarts the path of the wicked (v. 9).

The Virgin will praise the Lord because:

He has mercy on those who fear him in every generation.

...

He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty (*Lk* 1:50,53).

Recognizing the constant necessity of harmonizing worship with life, for us Servants the singing of Psalm 146 means to remember the Virgin, “model of the confidence befitting God's children, the humble woman who placed all her trust in the Lord.”¹⁷ Above all else, it reminds us of the urgency of the commitment we have made: to offer “apostolic service to all, to show special love for the poor and needy,”¹⁸ and to promote “justice among all men and women, children of the same Father.”¹⁹

The Psalm-prayers

25. According to an ancient tradition, revived in the new Liturgy of the Hours, each psalm is followed by an optional psalm-prayer.²⁰

The purpose of this presidential prayer is to suggest a Christian understanding of the psalm. In our case, it proposes a reading of the psalm in the light of our life as Servants.

After a silent pause, the leader recites the prayer which sums up and concludes the prayer of all.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 7.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, arts. 76c and 88.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, art. 77.

²⁰ Cf. *Institutio generalis de Liturgia Horarum*, no. 112.

The Reading-prayers

26. As in the traditional Vigil, the three psalms are followed by three reading-prayers. The three orations (1. Holy Mary, lowly servant of the Lord: to the Virgin of the *Fiat*; 2. Holy Mary, poor and lowly: to the Virgin of the *Magnificat*; 3. Holy Mary, woman of sorrow: to the Virgin at the foot of the cross) are addressed directly to our Lady and have an identical structure. Inspired by our constitutions, they express our life responsibilities in the language of prayer.

The closing supplication

27. The Vigil concludes with a hymn in which we ask the Virgin to renew within us constantly the ideals of our life and to keep us faithful to our vocation of service.

III. THE USE OF THE VIGIL

28. As already mentioned, it has been the tradition of the Order to recite the *Benedicta tu* every day. Some communities of friars and sisters have preserved this ancient custom. Since others prefer weekly recitation, the best time would be Friday afternoon, the vigil of our Lady's day. This corresponds to the original intent of the *Benedicta tu*. However, since the Vigil (passing beyond its original character) is considered a traditional homage of the Servants to the Virgin, it can very properly be celebrated on Saturday, the day which is dedicated to our Lady.

29. According to a rubric found in various editions of the Vigil, it is not recited in common on the last three days of Holy Week. During Eastertime the Alleluia is not added to the antiphons and responsories.

30. According to uninterrupted tradition, the Vigil is sung or recited while standing, as a moment of joyous prayer. Where there are no particular reasons to the contrary, this tradition should be preserved.

31. A rubric permits the substitution of the reading-prayers with a Marian reading. This allows the community to use a wide range of texts. However, the systematic use of longer readings would deprive the Vigil of one of its most characteristic elements. In the traditional form, in fact, it would eliminate texts which express the Marian devotion of the time of our first Fathers. In the new form, it would eliminate texts which connect the traditional homage with the present constitutions.

32. The Vigil of Our Lady, either in the traditional or in the new form, is a prayer characteristic of the Order. It should always be celebrated as a homage to our Lady as well as an expression of our common identity at the more important moments of our life together: general and provincial chapters, meetings and conferences and all those occasions when brothers and sisters Servants of Mary are gathered together by their common ideal of love and service.