

THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

“O GOD, COME TO MY ASSISTANCE: THE LITURGY OF VESPERS”

On December 13, when Archbishop Lucas unseals for the people of the Archdiocese the Jubilee Doors at St. Cecilia’s Cathedral, he will do so in the context of Solemn Vespers, the evening prayer of the Universal Church. While it is the case that all members of the Church are invited to pray this series of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, and the clergy are obligated by their ordination to pray it, very few have likely encountered it, and proper preparation for participating in it may be valuable.

As we are to “pray without ceasing” (1Thes5:17), the Church has provided a format for prayer that is appropriate for both lay and ordained members. The Church refers to it as the Liturgy of the Hours, Divine Office, or Office of Readings. The Office contains within it the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, Daytime Prayer, Evening Prayer (Vespers) and Night Prayer (Compline). In this Office, “Christ himself continues his priestly work through his Church.” Each member of the Church participates according to their role in the Church.

Because of the format of such communal prayer, with the integration of hymnody, recitation and litany, the celebration of this liturgy demands not only harmonization but also instills a deeper understanding of the liturgy, its universality, and the treasury of Sacred Scripture.

It is especially appropriate that Archbishop Lucas unseals for us the Holy Doors of the Father’s Mercy, and together we immediately entreat God by singing, “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me.” As it is with much of our prayer, we ask God’s divine and abundant assistance to make us holy people intent upon doing his will. This night, above all others, we ask God’s forgiveness as we seek once again to turn ourselves away from sin and the temptations of the devil, and toward the living and compassionate face of Jesus, who is the face of the Father’s mercy.

Upon invoking God’s presence and gracious assistance, we join our voices to sing the hymn “All People That On Earth Do Dwell”. Because of the convergence on this night of the unsealing of the doors, *Gaudete* Sunday and the theme of mercy, our hymn joyfully celebrates the triune nature of God’s mercy, which endures from age to age. Our voices are lifted heavenward to unite with the choirs of angels in eager worship.

After the hymn, we are seated for the singing (or recitation) of two psalms and a canticle. The first psalm is Psalm 113, a beautiful psalm of praise. The second psalm is Psalm 116, a psalm of thanksgiving, recalling the “cup of salvation”. The canticle is the great Christological Canticle from Philipians, in which we hear how Christ humbled himself for the forgiveness of our sins.

After the canticle, we hear a reading from the Word of God. After the proclamation of the Word, Archbishop Lucas will offer us words of inspiration and faith as he relays the joy of the mercy of God which is abundantly available for us. When the homily is finished, the assembly responds to both the reading of the Word and the words of our Shepherd, in a sung response.

All present then stand as together we sing the hymn of praise sung by Mary in the Gospel of Luke, the glorious Magnificat. “*Magnificat anima mea, Dominum...*” “*My soul does magnify the Lord...*” In this ancient song, we join together with Mary in both declaring our desire to give glory to God in all we do while recalling the wondrous works God has done on our behalf out of His tremendous love for us.

At the conclusion of the Magnificat, the cantor leads us in praying the intercessions. The Archbishop leads us in the prayer taught by our Lord, the Our Father. He then blesses us, and the ministers process from the church. We are left with a deep sense of gratitude to God for the mercy available to us, and a beautiful experience of the universal prayer of the Church.