

BOOK REVIEW

De Breviarii Romani Liturgia, by C. Callewaert, J.C.D.

A remarkable and rare Latin book has lately been reprinted that will be of great interest to anyone who has a fascination with the mystery of Catholic liturgy: whether they be deeply knowledgeable, or merely curious to know why and how the Church has mandated and sustained this continual, world-wide prayer, from the time of Christ until now.

Originally published in 1939, *De Breviarii Romani Liturgia*, by the eminent Belgian liturgist Camillus Callewaert, JCD, is a compendium of liturgical knowledge concerning the official, daily prayer of the Catholic Church, as it cycles through each day, and through the seasons of the Liturgical year. The author has compressed the studies of a lifetime into 300 pages of beautiful modern Latin prose, through which the reader can not only garner vast amounts of information, but also partake of the author's cheerful and intense piety and appreciation for the mystery and beauty of the Breviary in the life of the Church and Her members. This book has arisen at this time so that the authentic vision of the Church's public prayer may be preserved and transmitted in a time when such appreciation has been by and large extinguished.

The author of the work, C. Callewaert, is eminently qualified to handle this niche subject. He wrote a number of books about the Liturgy, and commentaries on ancient texts gleaned from monastic libraries. He sat as an instructor in Liturgy and other subjects in the Seminary of the Diocese of Brussels, and because of his erudition, was commissioned by the Bishop of that Diocese to commit all his knowledge to written form, to be made available to priests, seminarians, and scholars worldwide. The extent of his knowledge is evident by the copious footnotes, many of which the author offers comment upon, in tiny print, for the extra-zealous student.

The ease with which he spills out a torrent of well organized facts is worthy of respect; but the spirit and piety that obviously informs the subject matter makes the book somewhat of a page-turner. The over-arching concept is beautifully presented in the first page: that in order to restore on earth the perfect worship of God, Christ set up a triad of sacred, indeed supernatural, structures: (1) His Sacrifice, enshrined and perpetuated in the Holy Mass; (2) His Sacraments, by which the grace of His Sacrifice is distributed to the elect; and (3) the priestly prayer, in which humankind offers to the Eternal God a continual chorus of praise and thanksgiving, mirroring the choirs of angels performing their celestial duty. The last of these is the subject matter of his book, whole and entire. His ultimate goal is to make it possible for the Divine Office to be recited, not only "*attente et devote*", but "*plene intelligatur*".

So, starting with this sublime vision, Msgr. Callewaert, like a fine Belgian microscope, zeroes in first on the larger aspects of the Liturgical Year, the seasons, the weeks, and the canonical hours. He exposes the beauty of the structure of each part of the Office, and shows how it relates to the whole perfect construct. There is no aspect of the Breviary that is not concisely described, and the historical precedents are laid out like the finest details of a beautiful tapestry. Those with an interest in monastic practice, both East and West, cannot fail to appreciate the breadth and depth of the author's knowledge. (A knowledge, one might observe, reserved to a few, and, but for this book, headed for

oblivion.) Priests who absorb part of his spirit, might then pray, and feel how they are united to every generation of priest and monk, through space and time, back to the apostles themselves.

This book is obviously not headed for the *New York Time's* Best-seller list. It is directed to a narrow, but important audience: priests, religious (both men and women), scholars, and posterity. It is written in Latin: however, an intermediate knowledge of that language is sufficient to derive great profit from the time spent reading. The layout makes it easy to dip in and out, as the spirit moves you—it is not a book you would open and read in one sitting. The large ideas are in large print, the details are in sub-headings, outline-fashion, and the finest details are in the footnotes. This allows the reader to choose how deep to plunge into any particular subject.

As it was published in 1939, it deals with the Breviary of that time, namely, that of the reform of Pope St. Pius X. The author praises the reform, showing what was deleted, and what was restructured. In fact, the entire development of the Breviary is laid out in Chapter 2, from Apostolic times, through the desert Fathers, Benedictines, reform of Pius V, and so on. Since 1939, there have been additional reforms of the Breviary, always aimed towards greater ease, shorter prayers, fewer readings, and relaxation of discipline. Msgr. Callewaert's book does not deal with this period, *i.e.*, it has not been supplemented or updated. In this regard, it serves a vital purpose, that of setting standards for the esteem due to the Breviary, and for authentic reform.

In setting out this valuable reference work, the publisher, Romanitas Press, has done a distinct service to the Church. Any serious student who takes the (not-insignificant) effort to study this book will take away from it a lasting appreciation for the role of continual prayer in the life of the Church.

Fr. Thomas Blute