

F.A. Gasquet. English Monastic Life. Methuen & Co. London, 1904.

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CHAPTER VI

THE DAILY LIFE IN A MONASTERY

1. MATINS

The night Office in most monasteries began at midnight, although in some places the time varied according to the seasons of the year, from that hour till half-past two or three o'clock. Midnight, however, was so generally the time, that, in considering the daily life of a monastery, it may be assumed that the night vigils began with the first hour of each day. At some short time before the hour appointed for the commencement of the night Office the signal for rising was given in the common dormitory. Sometimes the sub-sacrist was charged with the ringing of a small bell, as he passed rapidly down the passage between the monks' beds or cubicles. In other places it was the duty of the abbot himself, or his prior, to awaken the monks from their slumbers and invite them to come and keep their night watch in the church. In any case the sacrist and his assistant had to be up betimes and before the others, for, as has been already said, they had to see that the lights were lit on the stairs and in "le standards" in the church. It was the duty of one of the novices, however, to light candles for his fellows, and set them about the places they occupied in the choir, since they did not as yet know the psalmody by heart.

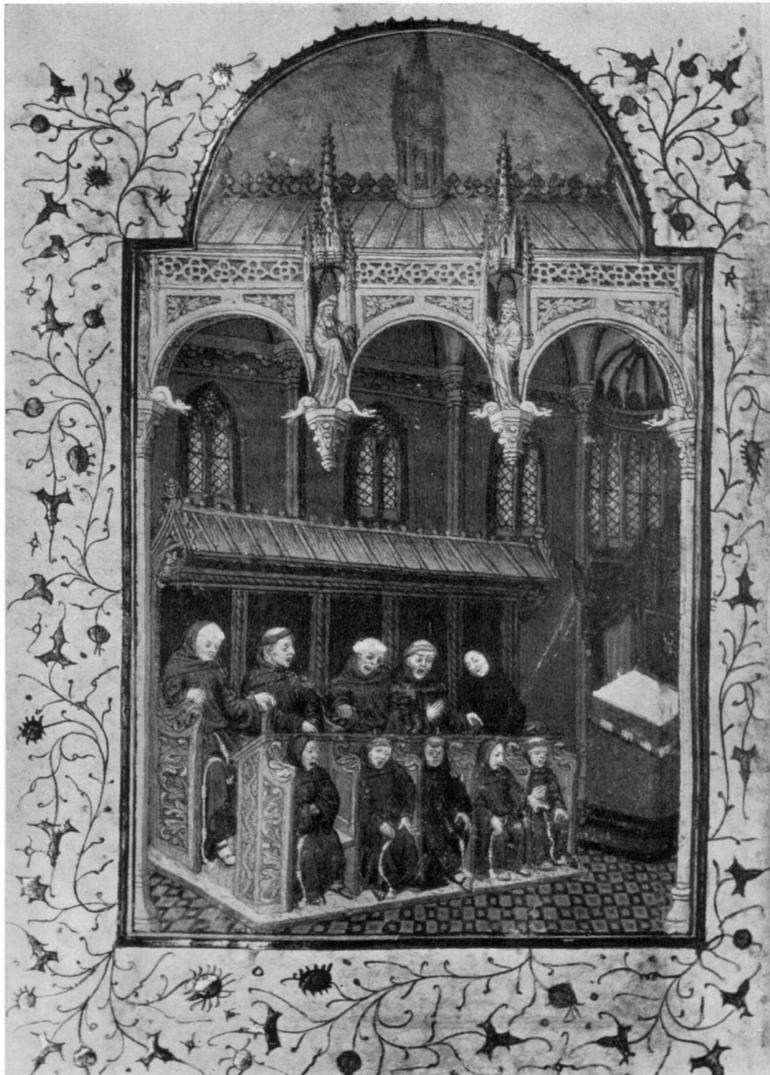
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Meanwhile the monks when roused from their sleep were taught to begin the day by signing themselves with the cross and commending themselves to God's protection. As they rose from their beds they put on those parts of their monastic habit which had been laid aside during the hours of sleep, and shod themselves with their "night-boots." These were probably fur-lined, cloth protectors for the feet, which served the double purpose of keeping them warm during the winter nights spent in the cold church, and of rendering their footfall inaudible, during the hours of the greater silence which lasted from Compline till Prime. Each monk as he finished his simple preparation, seated himself in front of his bead and there waited in silence, with his hood drawn well over his head, till the bell began to toll. Then, preceded by a junior carrying a lighted lantern,

the religious went out of the dormitory in companies of six at a time, and took their places in the choir. The juniors occupied as their normal position the stalls nearest to the altar, the youngest being next to the chancel step, the seniors being furthest away, and the superiors next to the entrance. The abbot or prior waited outside the church in the cloister, or at the entrance to the choir, until all had passed in before him and had taken their places, when he gave the signal for the tolling of the bell to cease, and then himself entered and took up his position in the stall next to the gate of the choir.

As the coming of the superior all rose from their knees, returned his salutation, and at once bowed down for what was known as the “Triple-prayer” — the Pater, Ave, and Creed—with which the night Office always commenced. Then the weekly antiphoner at a sign from the superior gave out the first of the “Fifteen,” or “Gradual”

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FRANCISCANS IN CHOIR

Illustration: Franciscans in Choir

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psalms. Great importance was always attached to the recitation of these psalms, and all the obedientiaries were bound to be present, except the guest-master when his duty to any stranger took him away, or the cantor on a day when any proper Lessons had to be read at Matins, and he was occupied officially in finding the places in the great chained book at the choir lectern. At the end of these psalms, by which, on all but the great feasts, the night Office was commenced, those officials who had duties to perform departed from the choir during the interval between the Psalms and the second ringing of the bells for the beginning of Matins proper.

When the second night-tolling ceased, at a sign from the superior, the hebdomadarian of the week, who had to sing the daily High Mass, began the Office with the usual *Deus in adjutorium*. This weekly official was bound always to be present at Matins during the time of his office when he sang the Mass ; and so strict indeed was the law of connection between Matins and the Mass, that should the hebdomadarian be unable for any reason to be present at the former, he had to obtain the services of some priest who could assist at Matins, to sing the Mass for him.

After the Invitatory, which was said or sung by the weekly antiphoner, either alone or with a companion, or on the great feasts by the cantor and his assistant, the superior, or hebdomadarian priest, gave out the first antiphon, and the rest of the antiphons were taken in turns by the seniors on either side. At the conclusion of the psalms of each Nocturn, the reader appointed for the first Lesson fetched the lighted candle, bowed to either choir and to the abbot if he were present, and then

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ascending the steps of the reading – place so held the candle that its light fell as he desired on the book which had been prepared by the cantor. Before beginning his reading he asked the usual blessing, bowing down from the place where he stood towards the abbot or superior, who gave it sitting in his stall. The Lesson was followed by the *Responsorium*, during which the reader of the Lesson made way for another, who had been appointed on the cantor's official list for the second Lesson, and so on, till after the last Lesson had been read, when the reader carried back the light to the place when the first reader had brought it, that it might be found ready for the Lessons of the next Nocturn. In some places the readers of the fourth, eighth, and twelfth Lessons were told to extinguish the candle, taking care that it did not smoke so as to annoy the brethren. It was to be lighted again by one of the novices appointed for the purpose during the last psalm of each Nocturn.

If the abbot was to sing the twelfth Lesson, or to take part in a Responsory, or other portion of the service, as he did on the great festivals, the cantor had to come with the abbot's chaplain and others to his stall, bringing the necessary books with lights carried by servers, and the cantor in a low voice was to assist him in the singing. On feasts with twelve Lessons, whilst the *Te Deum* was being canted, preparations were made for the solemn singing of the portion of the Gospel selected for the Office of the day. The church servants brought into the choir a portable reading-desk, which they placed at the steps leading to the presbytery. Others brought a cope of the colour of the day, with an amice, stole, and maniple. Meanwhile the sacrist had fetched the book of the Gospels

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with some solemnity from the altar, and had placed it on the desk, where the cantor was waiting to find the proper place. Having done so, at the indicated verse in the *Te Deum*, the cantor went to the stall of the hebdomadarian of the

Mass, and bowing to him conducted him to the desk, assisted him to vest, and pointed out to him the place in the Holy Gospels that had to be sung or read. Meanwhile the servers had come into the choir from the sacristy with incense and lights, and when the *Te Deum* was concluded all turned towards the priest whilst he canted the appointed Gospel, and finished Matins with the prayers of the day.

Immediately the bells began to ring for Lauds, and during the brief interval the priest unvested, and with the usual bow to each choir, which was slightly acknowledged by the monks on either side, he returned to his stall to wait till the cessation of the ringing gave the signal for the beginning of the next canonical Hour. Meantime the incense and lights had been taken back into the vestry, and the sacrist, having carried the Gospel-book back to the altar, the servants removed the desk out of the choir. The cantor busied himself during the interval at the great chained Antiphonary on the lectern, in order to see that all the places of Lauds were marked, and that the hanging lantern in front of the book was burning brightly enough to light up the great parchment page with its large square notes and big letters. In this interval the monks either remained sitting in their stalls with their hoods covering their heads, or they could take the opportunity of leaving the choir to restore their circulation by a brisk turn in the cloister, or for any other purpose.

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2. LAUDS

In ancient days the Office of Lauds was called *Matutinae Laudes* — “the morning praises” — because they were supposed to be always celebrated at dawn of day. In medieval monasteries, however, this canonical Hour was generally said or sung, with only a short interval between it and Matins. It would, therefore, have been probably somewhere about one o’clock in the morning that Lauds usually began.

If the feast was of sufficient rank for the hebdomadarian to be vested in a cope, he then occupied the stall next to the abbot ; if not, he remained in his own place, and, when the tolling of the bell ceased and gave notice of the conclusion of the interval, he at once intoned the *Deus in adjutorium* for the beginning of Lauds. It was his place to give out the first antiphon, the second being taken by the abbot, or by the first religious in choir. The rest of the antiphons were given out as at Matins, by one on each side in turn. The Chapter—called the “Little Chapter”—was supposed to be known by heart, and no book or light was allowed to be used in saying it.

The hebdomadarian gave out the antiphon of the *Benedictus*, and if he were vested in cope he would have to incense the altar or altars during the singing of that canticle. For this purpose two thurifers, and acolytes bearing candles, came from the sacristy before the antiphon was begun, and the thurifers, after the incense had been blessed by the abbot, accompanied the hebdomadarian to the High Altar, returning whence they had come after the ceremony had been performed. On Sundays, at the con-

clusion of Lauds, the hebdomadarian gave the blessing to the outgoing and incoming weekly servers.

Directly the Office was over the community retired once more to the dormitory and to bed. The juniors led the way with a lighted lantern, as when they had come down to Matins. The prior, however, waited in his stall until he had seen that all had passed out of the church except the sacrist, who had to remain behind to see that the lights were safely put out, and that the *Collectarium*, or book of Collects, and other choir books were carefully replaced in the aumbry. Then he too retired again to his bed in the room near the church. It would have been probably some time about half-past one or two in the morning before the monks found themselves once more in bed for their second period of repose.

3. PRIME AND THE EARLY MASS

It is somewhat difficult to say exactly at what time the Hour of Prime was generally said in a medieval monastery. It is possible, however, to assume that it was not earlier than six or later than seven o'clock in the morning. One Consuetudinary, that of St. Mary's, York, says that the bell was to ring for that Hour at seven, "unless for some reason the time was changed ; but that Prime must never be said before daybreak."

At seven o'clock, then, or thereabouts, after the monks had been allowed five hours for the term of their second repose—making with the rest they had had previous to the midnight Office, about eight hours in all—the prior, or whoever was appointed for the duty, roused the brethren. This was done by sounding a bell for the space of a *Miserere* psalm, and before the ringing was finished

the religious were expected to be already out of bed. They were now, at their second rising, to dress themselves in their day clothes and shoes, and to betake themselves to the church, where they were to be in their places before the bell had ceased to toll. Prime with its hymn, three psalms, and the beautiful morning prayer : "O Lord God Almighty, Who has brought us to the beginning of this day, so assist us by Thy grace, that we may not fall this day into sin, but that our words may be spoken and our thoughts and deeds directed according to Thy just commands," did not take very long, and concluded with the usual *Benedicamus Domino*. Immediately after this the great bell was rung for the *Missa Familiaris*, or early Mass, chiefly intended for the servants and workpeople of the establishment. At this the community were not bound to be present ; and so, whilst the bell was tolling, they passed into the cloister to begin their washing and complete their dressing, etc. The seniors and priests first occupied the lavatories, since they had now to say their own private Masses as soon as they were ready. Whilst the seniors were dressing, the juniors waited in their places reading or praying till their turn came. When the sign was made that the lavatories were

free, the novice-master ceased his instructions, and the novices put down their psalters in their places in the cloister ; the juniors returned their books to the shelves of the aumbry in the cloister, and then they went in turns to wash, going afterwards to the corner near the door of the refectory to smooth their hair.

It was during this hour after Prime that those who desired to approach the Sacrament of Penance could always be sure of finding a confessor in the chapter-

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room, where alone, be it remarked, the confessions of the brethren were heard. On all Sundays and feast days the early Mass was delayed until the washing was finished, when the religious who were not priests went in procession to the church to hear this Mass and to receive the Holy Eucharist. In these occasions they were sprinkled with holy water at the door of the church, and a crucifix was offered to them to kiss.

Of other days during this time, except the priests who, as had already been pointed out, now said their private Masses, the monks either took their books and studied in the cloister ; or, if they were obedientiaries, busied themselves in the necessary duties of their various offices.

The early Mass had to be taken in turn by all the priests, except by the infirmarian, who always celebrated for the sick in the infirmary, and by some of the other officials whose duties prevented their celebrating at this time. The priest, whose name was on the *tabula* to take this Mass, had to see that the altar had been prepared, and that the places were marked in the missal beforehand, so as not to cause unnecessary delays. At the same time those about to celebrate their private Masses prepared their chalices and cruets in the sacristy ; and, assisted by the junior monks not in priest's orders, went to the altars assigned to them. When two priests had their names entered on the *tabula* for the same altar, the senior took the first turn and the junior followed. If the former did not come, the latter was to wait till the priest saying the early Mass had got to the Epistle, and then he could himself take the altar, presuming that this senior had for some reason been unable to come.

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4. THE MIXTUM

Before the next public duty, which was the Morning Mass—celebrated it would seem about half-past eight, or thereabouts—on all days but fasting days, the community were called to the refectory for what was variously called the *mixtum*, or breakfast. Three strokes of the bell at the church door was the signal for this slight refection which the young members, who were not priests, could take at an earlier hour, if the superior so wished or thought good. This meal—if meal it could be called—was very slight, and consisted, according to one set of directions, of a quarter of a pound of bread, and a third of a pint of wine or beer. There was, however, even in this slight refection a religious decorum and a certain amount of ceremony. The weekly reader asked a blessing, and the first

religious present in the refectory gave it, saying : “Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, for Thy name’s sake eternal life to all our benefactors. Amen.”

In Kent the *mixtum* was not taken except on Sundays. It was also omitted on the three Rogation days, on the Ember days, and on certain vigils of feasts, which by ecclesiastical law were days of fasting.

5. THE MORNING OR CHAPTER MASS

Whilst the monks were at their morning refecton the first bell was kept ringing for the Morning Mass. This Mass was frequently called the “Lady Mass,” because

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it was usually celebrated at the altar of our Blessed Lady, and as a votive Mass in her honor, when the feast permitted it. In other places it was called the “Chapter Mass,” because it was followed immediately by the daily Chapter. When the first bell had ceased to ring, the monks took up their position in that part of the cloister known as the *Statio*, that is, the place where all assembled when they had to go into the church in procession. This place naturally varied in different monasteries according to circumstances. In St. Mary’s, York, it is described as being in the western walk of the cloister, before the common parlour.

On the second tolling of the bell the community proceeded in procession to the church. At the door they were presented with a crucifix to kiss, took holy water, and bowed to the representation of the Holy Trinity, or the crucifix, at the entrance. They then stood in their ranks in choir facing the altar, till, on the entrance of the superior, the bell ceased. Sometimes the Hour of Tierce was said before the morning Mass, but in any event the seniors were now in the stalls nearest to the altar.

At a sign from the cantor the novices took the graduals from the choir cupboard, or the psalters if the Mass was *de Requiem*, and distributed them. The priest came in at once and the Mass was said in a low but audible voice, with more or less solemnity according to the ecclesiastical rank of the day.

6. THE CHAPTER

Immediately after the conclusion of the morning Mass the great bell was set ringing for the daily Chapter. It would now have been somewhere about nine o’clock in the

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day. As long as the tolling continued the religious as a body remained sitting in their stalls in the church, “thinking,” as one Custumal says, “over any transgressions against the Rule or good discipline of which they may have been

guilty.” Meanwhile the chief officials responsible for the order of the house, called generally the *custodes ordinis*, repaired for a few minutes to the private parlour to consult as to any matter which might need correction, or to which public attention should be called ; at the same time, on the sound of the bell, all those who for any reason had not been present at the Mass, hastened to the chapter-room. During this interval one of the custodians of the cloister went round to see that all the doors were so closed and fastened, that no one could enter the monastery precincts during the time of the Chapter.

When the brief talk of the custodians was over, the junior among them went back to the door of the church to stop the bell ringing, and its cessation was the signal for the community to leave the choir and proceed to the chapter-room, the juniors walking first. Here all stood in their places till the entrance of the superior. If the abbot were present all bowed as he passed through their ranks, and as he reached his seat at the upper end of the room, the prior and one of the seniors from the abbot’s side of the choir came forward to kiss his hand, bowing to him both before and after this act of homage. By this ceremony they publicly renewed their monastic obedience on behalf of the community.

Whilst the community and superior were coming into the Chapter, the junior appointed for the office of weekly reader in the refectory, stood holding before his breast the

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COMMUNITY IN CHAPTER HOUSE, WESTMINSTER

Illustration: Community in Chapter House, Westminster

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Martyrology, or book of the names of the saints daily commemorated by the Church. When all had entered and taken their seats, the reader came forward, and placing the volume upon the lectern in the middle of the room, asked the blessing of the president in the usual form. This having been given, he read the portion of the *Martyrology* which gave the brief notices of the lives of the martyrs and other saints commemorated on the following day. When mention was made of any saint whose relics were possessed by the house, or who was specially connected with it as patron or otherwise, the community removed their hoods and bowed down as a mark of special reverence.

After the *Martyrology* all stood up and turned to the crucifix, or *Majestas*, during the usual morning prayers, which were said to call down God's blessing upon the work of the day, and to ask His protection over all the words and deeds to be uttered and done in His service. With the blessing : "May the Lord Almighty regulate our days and acts according to His peace" and the short reading called the *Capitulum*, this portion of the daily Chapter was concluded. Then, all again sitting, the abbot or presiding superior said, *Loquamur de Ordine nostro* : "Let us speak about the affairs of our house." At this point the novices retired from the chapter-room, and also any stranger religious, who was not professed for the monastery, who happened to be present. About all that was transacted in this part of the daily Chapter, the strictest silence was enjoined. Some of the Customals even declare that they do not set forth the manner of holding Chapter, as the secrets of the religious family are its own and all loyal sons would desire to keep them

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inviolate. Other regulations, whilst permitting the infirmarian to convey to the sick monks who were not present any order given, charged him on no account to relate anything else that happened in the Chapter, since no one was ever allowed to speak about such matters, not even to mention and discuss them with those who had been present.

When the room had been cleared of all but the professed monks of the monastery, the Chapter devoted itself to the correction of faults against good discipline. It was lawful for any religious, except a novice, to speak in the secrecy of Chapter about any matters that in his judgment required to be corrected. These generally resolved themselves into one of three classes relating to regular life : (1) negligences of all kinds, changes of customs, and mistakes in the divine service ; (2) want of due care in the keeping of silence ; and (3) neglect of the proper almsgiving on behalf of the house. As to all things in the first class it was the duty of the cantor and succentor to speak first, and to call attention to anything they had noticed amiss ; concerning shortcomings in the second class, the superior and the guardians of the cloister, whose special duty it was to watch over the monastic silence, were to have the first say ; and as regards the third, naturally the almoner and his assistant would have most information to give on all that regarded the monastic charities.

After the “proclamations” or “accusations,” the superior pronounced the punishment. No one was allowed to offer any defense or make any excuse, and the whole process was summary and without noise or wrangling. The penance was generally some corporal chastisement, with rod or other discipline and this, which to our

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modern ideas seems so curious, and indeed somewhat repellent a feature of medieval monasticism, was evidently at the time regarded as quite a natural, and indeed a useful and healthy form of religious exercise ; for, besides being looked on as a punishment, this form of corporal chastisement was resorted to with permission of the superior as a common means of self-mortification. Such voluntary penances were chiefly sought for on days like the Fridays of Lent, and especially on Good Friday, and when some brother specially desired to offer up penitential works for the soul of some departed brother.

When the questions of discipline had been disposed of, which ordinarily would have taken only a very brief time, the superior, if he desired to say anything, made his short address to exhortation. He then, if there was any need, consulted his community about any temporal or other matter, or asked their consent, where such consent was required. In all such temporal matters many of the Customals advise the junior members to defer to the age and experience of their elders, although they were of course free to give their own opinions, even if contrary to that of their elders.

It was at this time in the daily Chapter that any deed or charter to which the convent seal had to be affixed, and to which the convent had already assented, was sealed in presence of all by the precentor, whose duty it was to bring the common seal to the meeting when it was needed. When this part of the Chapter was finished, all matters such as the issuing of public letters of thanks or congratulation, etc., in the name of the community, were sanctioned, and the granting of the privilege of the

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fraternity of the house to benefactors or people of distinction. When the actual ceremony of conferring this favor, which was both lengthy and solemn, was to be performed, it was at this point that the “confratres” and “consorores” were introduced into the Chapter. After the ceremony the “confratres” received the kiss of peace from all the religious ; the “consorores” kissed the hand of each of the monks.

In the same way, on the day before a Clothing or Profession, the candidate presented himself before the abbot, at this point in the Chapter, and urged his petition. Also, before a monk was ordained priest he had to come before the Chapter ; and kneeling, to beg the prayers of his brethren. The superior was charged to explain to him again carefully at this time the responsibilities of so high a calling, and to warn him of the dangers and difficulties which he would have to encounter in his sacred office. Then the superior pronounced over him a

special blessing and offered up a special prayer for God's assistance. When there were many candidates for ordination who had to go elsewhere to receive their Orders, it was at this time in the Chapter that the schedule of their names was drawn up and handed to the senior, who was to accompany them to the bishop at whose hands they were to receive ordination.

Only on rare occasions, however, would there have been any such matters of public business. Ordinarily speaking, from the superior's address, if he made any, followed by his blessing, the Chapter passed to the commemoration of the departed. If the day was the anniversary of a benefactor whose soul ought to be remembered in the prayers of the community, the precentor, or the succentor

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HENRY VI BEING RECEIVED AS A CONFRATER AT EDMUNDSBURY

Illustration: Henry VI Being received as a confrater at Edmunsbury

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in his absence, came forward immediately after the superior had given his blessing, and standing in front of the reading-place, said : "To-day, sir, we should have the great bell rung" --or some other bell, according to the solemnity of the anniversary. "For whom?" asked the superior. "For so-and-so," replied the precentor, naming the special claim the person whose anniversary it was, had upon the community. Then the superior, bowing, said : "May his soul and the souls of all the faithful, by the mercy of God, rest in peace." Where upon the

precentor wrote the name of the benefactor upon the “tabula” for the day, that no one might have the excuse of absence for not knowing for whom the whole convent had to offer up their prayers that day. Then from the lectern the reader announced the usual list of the anniversaries of brethren entered in the necrology for the day ; and this again was followed by the precentor reading any mortuary roll, or notice of death of some religious or another house, or of some personage of distinction, if any such had been received. After reading such a roll, it was his duty to explain to the community what were their obligations in regard to the deceased. The Chapter was then concluded with the *De profundis* and a prayer for the souls of all departed brethren and benefactors.

On ordinary occasions, of course, the daily Chapter would not occupy a very long time, possibly a quarter of an hour or twenty minutes. At any rate, a full half-hour of the morning would be left before the High Mass, which began at ten o'clock. This time was generally spent by the monks in conversation in the cloister. On days when there was talking, the prior, or abbot if he had been present, on coming into the cloister when the

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Chapter was over, would sound three times the *tabula sonatila*, which was apparently a piece of hard wood, to which two other smaller pieces were loosely fastened, so that when shaken it gave forth a musical sound and served the purpose of our modern gong. This triple sounding of the *tabula* was always the signal for talking ; the superior, or whoever acted for him, pronouncing the word *Benedicite*, without which no conversation was to be permitted in the monastery. “By the three strokes,” says one author who sees deep meanings in ordinary things, “is to be understood the signs of our mortality, representing our coming into this world, our passage through life, and our transit through the portals of death.” The special significance of this thought in regard to conversations was apparently that in view of it, a bridle should be set upon the tongue and a guard upon the heart, which was so frequently disturbed by trifling images.

7. THE PARLIAMENT

After the Chapter the common business of the house was transacted. The discussion about all the many details of a great administration like that of a medieval monastery necessitated regular consultations between the officials and the superior, and frequent debates upon matters of policy, or matters of business, or on points of the Rule or observance. These meetings were known as “the Parliament,” or Discussions, and from them the word to signify our house or national representatives was taken.

One particular part of the cloister was selected where these monastic Parliaments were held, and thither all came who had any matter to suggest or business to trans-

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act with the officials. Here the abbot, or he who took his place, was ordered to be ever ready to hear what those had to say who sought him for guidance or direction. In another part of the cloister, during this time after Chapter, the senior monks met together to listen to devotional reading, and to discuss points that might strike them in their reading, or which had been suggested by the Divine Office. In the same way the juniors were to be in their places in the western walk of the cloister with their master, or one or more of the seniors, similarly engaged in asking questions as to observance, or seeking to know the meaning of any difficult passages in Holy Scripture. The novices, and the juniors who had been only recently professed, were together in the northern walk of the cloister, being taught the principles and practices of the monastic life. It was a precious time for the beginner, when the disciple was exhorted to question his instructor on all matters connected with the regular observance, but especially about the Rule and the Divine Office.

During this period of the Parliament the guardians of the cloister were directed to go about from group to group, to see that the laws of the regular life were observed as they should be. During this half-hour, except in the case of the officials who had to transact necessary business of the house, no conversation about worldly matters or vain tales were to be permitted. The Parliament time—between Chapter and High Mass—was devoted exclusively to spiritual matters or to the discussion of necessary business.

During this and all similar times of conversation the monks were warned to keep watch over their tongues.

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When asked their opinion or advice, they were to give it with modesty and moderation. No signals were to be permitted between various parts of the cloister ; the conversation was to be conducted in a low tone, and it was to be considered a matter of first importance that at these meetings all should be present.

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End Chapter.