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Saint Vincent's Daily Prayers, and the Development of Common Daily Prayers in the Congregation of the Mission

BY

JOHN E. RYBOLT, C.M.

Many Vincentian confreres will remember the changes made beginning in 1961, and codified after the general assembly of 1963, concerning daily prayers. The Sacred Congregation of Rites issued a decree dated 15 July 1960 concerning various aspects of the Divine Office. The Congregation of the Mission then gradually implemented this, which involved moving from the daily recitation of vocal prayers in a formulary of prayers to the recitation of the liturgical offices of Lauds in the morning and Vespers or Compline in Latin in the evening.¹ As far as I can determine, no real study has been undertaken concerning the development of those vocal prayers as part of the Vincentian heritage. Where did the traditional vocal prayers come from? Examination of scattered evidence will enable us to determine both the nature of exercises themselves as well as their content. The analysis presented here is offered in hopes that other sources can be uncovered that will fill out the picture of how the Congregation has prayed.

I. Early Sources

No one knows how Saint Vincent made his simple daily prayers before the development of the Congregation. It would be intriguing to know how he led his small clerical community at Clichy in prayer. Did the celebration in common of the Divine Office by the priests serving with him in Châtillon and by the Oratorians with whom he temporarily lived influence his thinking? Which prayers did he use to lead the Gondi household in their daily devotions? And how did his first recruits pray together? They must have had some prayers or at least a style of praying in French or Latin, but nothing has been found to tell us what they were.

When we study the years after the move to Saint-Lazare, however, several sources begin to show up which would be worth examining further. The earliest is the "Primitive Rules," known from the standard rules of the Internal Seminary and earlier regarded as summaries of the *Common Rules*.

The second source is the *Common Rules* of 1658. The draft version of the *Common Rules* in Codex Sarzana, 1653, is identical with the 1658 version

¹ William M. Slattery, circular letter of 8 December 1960, Stakelum papers, French and English versions in DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, IL.

in the matters that concern daily prayer.

A third source, less systematic, is the corpus of Saint Vincent's writings. Among them, the most significant for our purposes is his letter to Jane Frances de Chantal.

A fourth source is two contemporary catechisms. The first is the *Malgache Catechism*, printed in 1657 for use in Madagascar. Its presentation of morning and evening prayers is very similar to what became the Vincentian tradition. The second is the *Catechism for the Missions*, of a similar date.

A fifth general source is provided by several manuscripts dating from the lifetime of Saint Vincent, including the rules of office and early seminary rules.

1.) *Primitive Common Rules*

The *Primitive Common Rules*, in the section on the Order of Day, have several explicit references to daily prayers said in common according to a detailed schedule.

First, and most importantly, is one hour of meditation in the designated place. This was preceded by personal devotions in one's room. Next was the common recitation of the Little Hours (Prime, Tierce, Sext, None), while during this time, and perhaps afterwards, the priests would celebrate the Eucharist in turn. A particular examen was held before the main meal. Although it is not specified whether this was done in common or in private, it was held in common.

In the afternoon, a common recitation of Vespers and Compline took place at 2:00, and the recitation of Matins and Lauds for the following day was held at 5:00. A second particular examen followed, not specified as in common or in private, although it was held in common. At the end of the day, the rules ordained three acts of prayer: a general examen and "the ordinary prayers" (which are not indicated), plus the reading of the topic of meditation for the following day. As previously, it was not specified whether these prayers were said in common, but that was the case.

2.) *Common Rules*

The *Common Rules* of 1658 do not specify morning and evening prayer, at least in terms that became traditional in the Congregation. The only hint of these comes in chapter 10, article 18, dealing with "the timetable which is customary in the Congregation." The principal focus in these rules was on mental prayer held in common in the place designated for it (chap. 10, art. 7).

A secondary obligation was to pray the entire Divine Office, clearly specified as performed in common (chap. 10, art. 5). The monks at Saint-

Lazare had been required to sing the office, and then the obligation fell to the members of the Congregation who succeeded them there in 1632. As the founder explained, the archbishop of Paris allowed the members of the Congregation to simply recite the office there regularly, the exception being Sundays and feasts, when they would sing it.² By 1659, however, Vincent admitted that this prescription was not being observed at Saint-Lazare by anyone except the students of the Internal Seminary.³ This conflict of obligations continued in the Congregation.

The third requirement mentioned in the *Common Rules* is the three exams of conscience (chap. 10, art. 9), that is, before the two meals and at night before retiring. Here too, these are not specified as being done in common, although that must have been the regular procedure.

3.) *Saint Vincent's Practice*

Louis Abelly, Vincent's first biographer, describes Saint Vincent's practices in at least two places. The first is taken from an undated letter of his describing his private devotions before meditation.⁴ "On rising, I shall adore the majesty of God and thank Him for His glory, the glory He has given to His Son, to the Blessed Virgin, to the Holy Angels, to my Guardian Angel, to Saint John the Baptist, to the Apostles, to Saint Joseph, and to all the saints in paradise. I will thank them also for the graces He has given to the holy Church, and especially for those I have received from Him, particularly for having preserved me during the night. I will offer Him my thoughts, words, and actions in union with those of Jesus Christ; I will also ask Him to keep me from offending Him and to grant me the grace of carrying out faithfully whatever will be most pleasing to Him." It can readily be deduced that this had been his practice as a diocesan priest, although it is impossible to determine when he began to pray in this way. It may be an oversight, but he did not mention his patron saints here, those to whom he had a devotion.⁵

² *Saint Vincent de Paul. Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 15 vols. (Paris, 1920-1925), 12:332, Conf. 213, on the Divine Office, 26 September 1659 [Hereafter cited as CED]; Translated into English in *Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*, ed. and trans. by Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., Marie Poole, D.C., et al, 1-13a & 13b (New York: New City Press, 1985-2009), 12:270 [Hereafter cited as CCD].

³ CED, 12:332, 334 / CCD, 12:270-72.

⁴ Louis Abelly, *The Life of the Venerable Servant of God Vincent de Paul, Founder and First Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission*, ed. John E. Rybolt, C.M., trans. William Quinn, F.S.C., 3 vols. (New York, New City Press, 1993), 3:72; Text cited from CED, 13:142, doc. 42 / CCD, 13a:160.

⁵ Abelly names them as Vincent the deacon (of Zaragoza), who may be the same as Vincent of Xaintes, bishop of Dax; and Vincent Ferrer; see *Life*, 3:94.

The second passage in Abelly merely describes the sequence: "He went to the church where he remained for nearly three hours, sometimes longer, to make his mental prayer, offer mass, and recite part of the breviary."⁶ Perhaps the author was exaggerating, since he is specifying the period of three hours beginning at 4:30 as divided in this way: 4:30-5:30 for meditation; 5:30-6:00/6:15 for mass; then the remaining time, sixty to ninety minutes, just for the recitation of the Little Hours of the office, whether in common or individually. We know that Vincent sometimes went to confession in the morning or wrote letters,⁷ but this still does not explain the lengthy period claimed by Abelly as his regular routine. Perhaps Abelly was referring to the total amount of time he spent in prayer each day, the more likely explanation.

Vincent's own account of "our humble way of life,"⁸ presents Jane Frances de Chantal with a summary of his daily schedule, but does not clearly mention the content of his vocal prayers. "We get up at four o'clock in the morning and take half an hour to get dressed and make our bed. We make an hour of mental prayer together in the church and recite Prime, Tierce, Sext, and None together. We then celebrate our Masses, each in his own place." It appears from this that there were no specific vocal prayers in the morning. As for the evening, "...we go to the church to make the general examen, say evening prayers, and read the points for the next morning's prayer." In this case, there were specific prayers for the evening, but they were probably the standard evening prayers at use in France by the pious faithful during this period.



Etching of Saint-Lazare in the time of Vincent de Paul.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

⁶ Abelly, *Life*, 1:243.

⁷ For example, letters 639, *CED*, 2:362 / *CCD*, 2:395; and 787, *CED*, 2:569 / *CCD*, 2:621.

⁸ Letter 383, to Saint Jane Frances de Chantal in Annecy, from Troyes, 14 July 1639, *CED*, 1:563 / *CCD*, 1:554.

The minutes of the assembly of 1651⁹ show the community at Saint-Lazare still struggling with its schedule. After agreeing that an afternoon walk in the summer time should be held at 4:00, and a conference either at 2:00 or 8:00, Vincent asked one of the missionaries, Etienne Blatiron, C.M., how he spent his time while giving parish missions to ascertain how to schedule regular conferences. The priest's reply was that they allowed seven-and-a-half hours for sleep, and a half hour for meditation (as his confreres did in Madagascar), not including reading and the litany. They also celebrated the Divine Office together. Vincent's reaction to the reduction in the time allotted to meditation is not recorded, although his rules, both the *Primitive Common Rules* and the official *Common Rules* specify one hour, presumably one full hour, not divided into two or more sessions.

Some valuable details concerning the actual practice of morning and evening prayers, as celebrated by the community outside of Saint-Lazare, come from remarks made in Vincent's correspondence. Charles Nacquart, C.M., on his way to the mission of Madagascar, reported: "...we said Mass and had *morning and evening prayers publicly*, weather permitting, in the way our Congregation does during Missions. I had some leaflets printed for this purpose, which I distributed to the crew."¹⁰ We can presume that the content of these morning and evening prayers were the same as Nacquart included in his catechism, mentioned below.

Another letter from Madagascar reveals similar comments on morning and evening prayers while traveling to their new mission. On rising, the writer made as his usual prayer the Office as far as Vespers (that is, only the Little Hours); next, a half-hour of mental prayer, and then "morning prayers," whatever they were, followed by Mass. In another place, he mentions the traditional *Itinerarium Clericorum*, the Divine Office, the Angelus, and the Litanies of the Holy Name of Jesus and of Mary. For the evening, specifically: "Each evening I recited the prayers as is done at Saint-Lazare, *saying the Acts aloud*," referring probably to the "ordinary evening prayers" mentioned above.¹¹

4.) Catechisms

A surprising source which illuminates the development of the community's vocal prayers is the Malgache Catechism of 1657, the work of M. Nacquart.¹²

⁹ Doc. 105, *CED*, 13:347 / *CCD*, 13a:387.

¹⁰ Letter 1179, Charles Nacquart to Saint Vincent, 5 February 1650, *CED*, 3:550 / *CCD*, 3:542.

¹¹ Letter 1836, Jean-François Mousnier, to Saint Vincent, from Fort Dauphin, 6 February 1655, *CED*, 5:281 / *CCD*, 5:281.

¹² See Abelly, *Life*, vol. 2, chap. 1, sect. 9, part 5, pp. 145-46; also in Letter 1179, 5 February 1650, *CED*, 3:569-77 / *CCD*, 3:561.

It is the first book published in the Malgache language, in the sense that it contains both French (sometimes Latin) and Malgache in parallel columns for the instruction of the native people. What is remarkable is that the text given in Instruction XIX, "Concerning morning and evening prayers, with the *Benedicité* [grace before meals] and thanksgiving, and several antiphons," is largely identical both in form and content to those morning and evening prayers which became traditional in the Congregation. The author, a member of the Congregation, must have taken the daily prayers in use during his time and published them as part of his catechism. This must mean that such prayers were known and available for use. Whether they were standard in the Congregation first and then adopted for this catechism, or were in use more generally outside the Congregation and then adopted by the confreres for their personal use, is unclear from the evidence at hand. One standard indication of this similarity is the use of the dialogue format introducing the acts of prayer: 'Let us place ourselves in the presence of God,' 'Let us adore God and thank Him for all his benefits,' etc. This dialogue makes most sense in a group, such as a family or a school.

A similar witness to the content of daily prayers is found in the "Second Catéchisme pour les missions," published by Joseph Guichard.¹³ Its attribution to Saint Vincent has been challenged, but at least it represents the state of daily prayers in his period. The questions in the section on morning prayers specify making the sign of the cross on awaking, along with the prayer: "My God, I give you my heart." After dressing, the practice was to make acts of adoration, thanksgiving, the offering of oneself, and a petition to remain sinless during the day, followed by the Our Father, Hail Mary and the Creed. This pattern follows the one mentioned above in Abelly. For evening prayer, the focus was on the examination of conscience.

5.) Other sources

Other sources have been examined for insight into these prayers: the bull of erection, "Salvatoris nostri" (1633), containing the "Institute" or charter of the Congregation, the instructions for the missionaries sent as army chaplains (1636),¹⁴ the original internal seminary (novitiate) rules (1652),¹⁵ the draft rules of office in Codex Sarzana (1653),¹⁶ the custom book of Saint-Lazare

¹³ J. Guichard, *Saint Vincent de Paul catéchiste* (Paris, n.d.). A recent study is Piotr Szczepański, "Evangelizare Misit Me", *Catechesi e Catechismo nelle Missioni Popolari dei Missionari di San Vincenzo de' Paoli in Francia tra 1617 e 1660* (Rome, 2006).

¹⁴ "...little regulations of the Mission, ...prayer, Divine Office, spiritual reading, and the examinations of conscience." In *CED*, 13:279-81 / *CCD*, 13a:307-09.

¹⁵ "Règles du Séminaire Interne. Qui remontent à 1652," ACM [Archives of the Congregation of the Mission] Paris, ms.

¹⁶ John E. Rybolt, C.M., ed., "Codex Sarzana," *Vincentiana* 35:3-4 (1991), 307-406.

(1659),¹⁷ the notebooks of Brother Robineau,¹⁸ the foundational seminary rule for the Collège des Bons-Enfants in Paris and its derivatives. Apart from a few generic observations, these sources do not offer much original material. The custom book treats special feasts and celebrations during the liturgical calendar but offers information only about substitutions occasioned by a feast or special occasion, such as Holy Week or Easter.

The “Institute” was embedded in the bull of erection issued by Urban VIII in 1633 and reflects the petition made to him by Saint Vincent.¹⁹ The pope responded by accepting the points of the petition, however he included this simple sentence which was not part of the original letter: “But everyone, priests as well as the others, shall meditate for an entire hour and also make use of the examination of conscience.”²⁰ As will be seen below, this comprised the core of the common and distinctive prayer life of the early Congregation, prayer in the morning and the evening.

The Bons-Enfants seminary rule, dating from 1645, parallels in some regards the practice at Saint-Lazare: rising at 4:00, meditation in common followed by the Litany of the Holy Name and the Angelus. The Little Hours then were recited, followed by a time for study and the first class of the day, at 6:45. Only at 8:15 was mass celebrated. Vespers and Compline were celebrated at 2:00, then “anticipated” matins and lauds for the following day were held at 5:30. The general examen, various prayers, etc., concluded the series.²¹ Other seminary rules followed the Bons-Enfants model. As for morning prayers, however, they are clearer and reinforce the conclusions drawn here: private prayers in one’s room, followed by meditation in common. For example, a later version of the Bons-Enfants rule reads: “On awaking, to give one’s heart to God, make the sign of the Cross and say some little prayer; . . . then while kneeling to make the five regular acts of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, offering of oneself and acts to God, and petition for the graces needed to spend the day well.”²²

The rules of office for the local superior, presented in Codex Sarzana, offer little on the subject of daily prayers apart from one paragraph dealing with daily Mass after morning prayer.

¹⁷ “Coutumier de la Congrégation de la Mission Propre à la maison de St. Lazare,” ACM Paris, ms., original.

¹⁸ Louis Robineau, *Remarques sur les actes et paroles de feu Monsieur Vincent de Paul, notre très honoré Père et Fondateur*, ed. André Dodin (Paris, 1991).

¹⁹ CCD, 1:140-44; following the publication in *Annales* 91 (1926), 140-44.

²⁰ CED, 13:261 / CCD, 13a:299.

²¹ The 1645 text was published in Maurice A. Roche, *Saint Vincent de Paul and the Formation of Clerics* (Fribourg, Switzerland: 1964), pp. 188-96.

²² Cited in Félix Contassot, “Saint Vincent et les Séminaires” (Paris, 1960), p. 133; unpublished typed manuscript in ACM Paris, Contassot papers.

II. Saint Vincent's Lifetime

Although the actual format and implementation of these various obligations outlined above is not completely clear, the following represents one possible order for prayer as celebrated at Saint-Lazare.

MORNING

Private prayers (4:00): Were said kneeling in one's room on arising (morning offering,²³ acts of faith, hope, charity, etc.) before going to the chapel for meditation.

Meditation in common (4:30): A leader read the subject beforehand, and the meditation was followed by the recitation of the Litany of the Holy Name of Jesus.²⁴ This litany, approved only for private use at the time, existed in several versions. Consequently, it is unknown exactly which one was in use at Saint-Lazare in the earliest days of the Congregation, although the version in the Malgache catechism shows variants that may have been those of the period.²⁵

Conclusion (5:30): Repetition of prayer was held on various days of the week, in the morning, before Mass.²⁶ Chapter was held on Fridays, either following or possibly substituting for all or part of the meditation. It concluded with a lengthy prayer of absolution. Did the community recite the morning Angelus daily? It may not have been a regular part of the morning prayer.²⁷ In the Malgache catechism, however, the Angelus falls between the prayer to the guardian angel, *Angele Dei*, and the Litany of the Holy Name of Jesus.

Divine Office (5:30) (Little Hours): Because of the difficulty of providing time for each priest in turn to celebrate Mass, as well as to provide acolytes for each Mass, the recitation of the Little Hours and the celebration of Mass took place simultaneously, but in different places, with the priests

²³ Conference 117, CED, 11:179 / CCD, 11:172 (*offrande*); Conference 199, CED, 12:163 / CCD, 12:136 (*oblation*). Alméras, in his circular of 27 July 1662 (*Recueil des principales Circulaires...* [Paris, 1877], vol. I, p. 56), speaks of another kind of morning offering: "the morning offerings, in which each one recommends himself in a special way to this Queen of Virgins."

²⁴ This was the custom in Paris: Letter 404, Saint Vincent to Louis Lebreton, 12 October 1639, CED, 1:590 / CCD, 1:581-82. It was occasionally called the "Litany of Jesus."

²⁵ The following invocations are missing: *Fili, Redemptor mundi; Iesu amabilis; Iesu Rex patriarcharum; Ab omni malo*. Also, the second collect begins: *Humanitatis tuae ipsa divinitate, unitae Domino Iesu Christe; timorem...* [pp. 186-88]. Ludvig Munthe, Elie Rajaonarison, Désiré Ranaivosoa, *Le Catéchisme Malgache de 1657* (Antananarivo, 1987). This includes a reproduction of *Petit Catechisme avec les prieres du main et du soir* (Paris, 1657), with translations and annotations.

²⁶ For example, CED, 11:257 / CCD, 11:235-36.

²⁷ Letter 1751, Vincent to Mark Cogley, 13 June 1654, CED, 5:152 / CCD, 5:156.

responsible for fulfilling their obligation of recitation in private.²⁸ The novices and students were the acolytes for the numerous Masses (as Saint Vincent was on occasion), but probably as a group they were also responsible for the recitation of the hours. This was complicated by feast days with the need to sing a lengthy High Mass. In the definitive 1888 publication of the Internal Seminary rules, the following was added to the traditional rule 4: "if we are held to the Divine Office."²⁹ This addition shows that the scheduling problems caused by these overlapping obligations did not exist in some houses. This must have been the case even in the earliest years of the Congregation.

Eucharist: The priests celebrated mass individually, with someone celebrating a common daily Eucharist for the brothers (coadjutors and seminarians). The rules for the Internal Seminary, 1652, specify the morning Eucharist at 7:00 followed by breakfast. This means that there was a somewhat lengthy free period between meditation, with the Divine Office, and the Eucharist. The time was filled with other devotions or study. On Sundays and feasts, however, a common high mass was sung as well as Vespers. It is not clear whether all the priests attended but, in comparison with later practice, a high mass for all might have been celebrated later in the morning, after they had attended an earlier low mass at which the participants could receive communion on permitted days while fasting.

Examen (Examination of conscience): was held before the main meal, but the format for this was not specified at an early date. The Angelus prayer is not mentioned at all in connection with the examen. Indeed, since the main meal was scheduled in the Primitive Rules at 11:00,³⁰ this fell before the traditional time for the Angelus, namely noon. Vincent's letter to Jeanne de Chantal, however, shows that, at least in 1639, another custom had been introduced, a common visit to the Blessed Sacrament following the main meal, with the recitation of the Angelus concluding this visit. René Alméras, Vincent's successor as superior general, in commenting on the veneration that the Congregation should have for the Virgin Mary, confirmed that the recitation of the Angelus was the regular custom: "...that angelic salutation three times a day, and with three Hail Mary's each time."³¹

²⁸ Codex Sarzana, rules for the local superior, chap. 5: "Every day after morning prayer mass shall be celebrated which all who are not priests shall attend, except those who are bound to the common recitation of the canonical hours at the same time and others, both lay and clerics, who have permission for special reasons to attend mass at some other time."

²⁹ *Regulae Seminarii Interni Congregationis Missionis. Monita ad Curatores* (Paris, 1888), p. 16.

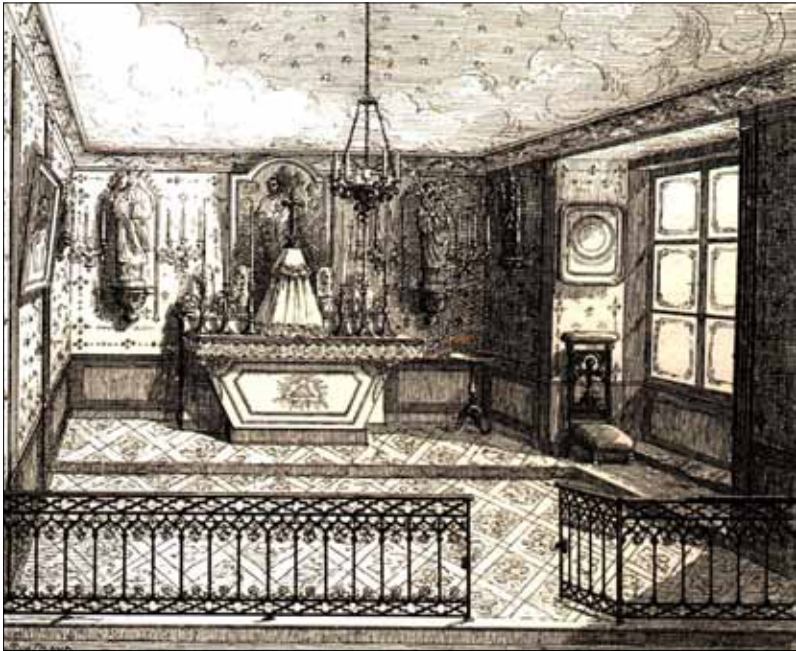
³⁰ The time for the midday meal had also, for a time, been set as 10:30; see *Recueil*, vol. I, p. 62, note 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56, circular of 27 July 1662. Alméras does not specify when or how it was done.

AFTERNOON and EVENINGS

Divine Office: Vespers and Compline were held in the early afternoon, at 2:00, and Matins and Lauds for the following day were recited at 5:00. According to Saint Vincent's own testimony, however, this obligation came to be fulfilled only by the seminarians, with the priests reciting the office in private. On Sundays and feasts, however, various parts of the office were sung.³²

Examen: The second examination of conscience followed Matins and Lauds, just prior to the evening meal. At times, a conference with repetition of prayer was held. However, in general, the weekly conference was held in a chapel at the time of night prayers. It generally closed about 9:00, in keeping with the rule for retiring (although Vincent sometimes exceeded his self-imposed limit).³³ This conference concluded with another prayer to Mary, *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*.³⁴



Vincent de Paul's room at Saint-Lazare, transformed into a chapel. Drawing by Bertrand.

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

³² Conf. 213, to the Congregation of the Mission on the recitation of the divine office, 26 September 1659, *CED*, 12:325-40 / *CCD*, 12:264-77.

³³ Conf. 203, to the Congregation of the Mission on humility, 18 April 1659, *CED*, 12:209 / *CCD*, 12:171.

³⁴ *Recueil*, op. cit., "with which we conclude all our meetings."

General Examen with Night Prayer: the night prayers, the “ordinary prayers,” were much different from the morning prayers, which were generally done in one’s room preceding meditation. Night prayer was much more developed. Since during a mission the traditional evening prayers were celebrated in the parish church with the people, we may be able to conclude that these prayers were traditional and well enough known to the faithful.³⁵ These prayers, probably said kneeling, followed a traditional pattern, seen even in non-Vincentian sources. This involved a leader who introduced the prayer to follow, with such words as “Let us place ourselves in the presence of God,” followed by the prayer said by everyone.³⁶ Whether these were said aloud or in private is not clear, however, but they were probably said in silence. The emphasis, however, if we can deduce it from Alméras’ commentary in 1662, was not on the individual prayers themselves but rather on the examination of conscience preceding them. This was followed by the *Confiteor*, clearly said aloud. Alméras also lauded the use of the prayer to Mary that concluded the day, *Maria mater gratiae*. The practice of a closing Marian prayer was undoubtedly borrowed from Compline, but since Compline had been pushed up to the early afternoon, it would be natural to conclude the actual day with another hymn or prayer to Mary.

This plan for daily prayers does not include the rosary. As is well known, Vincent wore a large rosary on his cincture and recited it when he could, for example while traveling or walking into the city. He apparently never recited it in common, since it is essentially a private prayer, nor did he require his confreres to follow his practice of wearing the rosary.³⁷ Further, he did not specify the recitation of the rosary in the *Common Rules*. The only places where its recitation was imposed were for the novices (seminarists) on Sundays and feasts, and for the brothers at the time of prayers for a departed superior general.³⁸

In addition, other devotional practices took place, not mentioned here, such as novenas, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, and special feast-day observances. Although these can be found in the Custom Book of Saint-Lazare, the founder did not consider them as forming part of the core of the prayer life of his Congregation.

My supposition is that in Saint Vincent’s time the order and content of daily morning and evening prayers were already traditional. Instead of

³⁵ See Letter 1974, a priest to Saint Vincent, from Rome, 1655, *CED*, 5:482 / *CCD*, 5:487.

³⁶ See Letter 2715, Saint Vincent to Pierre Cabel, from Paris, 9 November 1658, *CED*, 7:353 / *CCD*, 7:367-68.

³⁷ Edme Jolly, C.M., superior general after René Alméras, C.M., followed the same practice.

³⁸ *Regulae Seminarii Interni*, p. 41; *Collectio Bullarum, Constitutionum ac Decretorum quæ Congregationis Administrationem spectant*. Die 2 Feb. Anno Domini 1847 [n.p., but Paris]. *Constitutions*, 1668, chap. IV, § 2, p. 26.

composing them anew, he probably adapted them for use by his confreres. Since the various rules did not specify many details, it is possible that the traditional morning and evening prayers in common use among French Catholics were simply maintained, since the members of the Congregation would have already known them and used them even before entering the community.

III. Before the French Revolution

Very few documents have been discovered which specify the order and content of the Congregation's daily prayer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, one undated and anonymous Italian manuscript booklet in the archives of the Maison Mère³⁹ is a witness to this period. It was composed after the canonization of Saint Vincent, in the handwriting of the eighteenth century, but it is unclear why it was written or by whom. Nevertheless, it contains the texts of the daily prayers, and it gives the order of the following procedure for traditional Vincentian vocal prayers:

Rising: prayers are said in one's room: to the Trinity, Blessed Virgin, guardian angel, and patron saints. (The texts of these prayers are not, however, identical with those that were traditional in the Congregation.) Afterward, one prayed the Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed, etc.

Meditation: this began with *Veni, sancte Spiritus* and concluded with the Litany of the Holy Name of Jesus and the Angelus.

Particular Examens: *Veni, sancte Spiritus* and examen; then the psalm *De profundis* for the dead, concluding with the Angelus.

Conferences, spiritual reading, or other functions: *Veni, sancte Spiritus* at the beginning, and concluding with *Sancta Maria succurre miseris*, versicle and response [V/R], and the collect, *Concede nos famulos tuos*.

Meals: Blessing and Thanksgiving: these are probably from the Roman Ritual, but they are not mentioned otherwise.

General Examen: *Veni, sancte Spiritus* and examen, followed a series of prayers probably said in silence, concluding with the Confiteor and

³⁹ Undated manuscript book, with a later title, "Prières et Méditations pour le Missionnaire"; the identification number is 681, ACM Paris. Many annotations are in Italian, as are the introductions and prayers for the general examen (or night prayer).

absolution said aloud; then collects: *Visita quaesumus Domine*, and *Respice, quaesumus Domine*; prayers to Saint Joseph, the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the prayer to one's Guardian Angel, *De profundis*, and *Maria, Mater gratiae*. Its title in this manuscript is not "Evening Prayer" but "General Examen," an indication of its central focus. The format is the same as what became traditional in later years, and may be presumed to be the oldest existing text of this exercise.

Since the Congregation in Spain was founded from Italy, the same pattern of prayer was followed by the Congregation of the Mission in Spain in its earliest days. An important manual of meditations, used by clergy and laity alike (*Manual de piadosas meditaciones...* Barcelona, 1709), omitted any mention of common morning prayers. The common meditation began simply with the *Veni, sancte Spiritus*, its versicle and response, and the traditional collect, *Deus, qui corda fidelium*. Evening prayer, however, was much more developed in this book and followed the standard mentioned above.⁴⁰

A book of Christian prayers for laity, composed by a Vincentian named Leroux (his first name cannot be determined), was published in 1732 and several times reprinted (in 1750, 1763, with perhaps others).⁴¹ In it the author followed the same general format of morning and evening prayers used in the Congregation and known from other sources. The texts of the acts of the presence of God, adoration, etc., are similar but not exactly the same as the eventual standard. This probably reflects the fact that several traditions existed side-by-side, since these prayers were recited in private anyway. Those that were recited publicly within the Congregation, by contrast, are the same as those published by Leroux.

Edme Jolly, C.M., superior general, composed a report⁴² with responses to the provinces following the general assembly of 1679. The province of Poitou had asked about daily prayers during the missions, and Jolly promised to "send very soon the formulary of prayers to be used during a mission; we will note the time and the way to say them, and which *Exercice du Chrétien* should be used by all the houses." This brief sentence shows that the missionaries were using these daily prayers and were in all likelihood taking them from one of the popular books of piety in widespread

⁴⁰ *Manual de piadosas meditaciones... por los Padres de la Casa de la Congregacion de la Mission de esta Ciudad de Barcelona* (Barcelona, 1766) [corrected reproduction of 1720 and 1730 edition]. A previous ecclesiastical approval, dated 30 April 1709, appears in the introduction. This was the first book printed by the Spanish Vincentians, just five years after their foundation.

⁴¹ Leroux, *Prières et instructions chrétiennes dans lesquelles se trouve renfermé tout ce que la Religion veut que nous croïions, que nous pratiquions et que nous demandions*, Nouv. éd. (Paris, 1723).

⁴² Undated circular (1679), *Recueil*, vol. I, pp. 171-72.

use during the period.⁴³ Like all conscientious administrators, Jolly wanted to choose a standard text and to do so carefully.

His successor, Nicolas Pierron, C.M., felt a similar need: to regulate the schedule of the Saint-Lazare students and their professors during their two weeks at a summer house. He prescribed rising at 5:30, followed by meditation (with no mention of morning prayers, since they were always said in private), then mass, reading of the New Testament around 7:00, followed by breakfast and recreation. Those obliged to the breviary would recite everything in private: Little Hours during the morning, and rest after dinner and supper. Particular and general exams were to be held at their regular time.⁴⁴

In the eighteenth century at the general assembly of 1759, a postulatium was presented by the province of Lyons concerning daily prayers. They asked that morning and evening prayers be said aloud. Louis De Bras, C.M., superior general from 1747 to 1761, rejected the request with a traditional Latin saying: *Nihil innovetur nisi quod traditum est*. Although their proposal was not accepted, this marks the beginning of a movement to change the traditional system.⁴⁵

At the dawn of the Revolution, during the general assembly of 1788, Jean Félix Cayla de la Garde, C.M., the newly elected superior general, proposed a revised rule for the seminaries. Concerning the daily prayers, we can perceive what would become the practice after the Revolution. Art. 3: "The morning meditation will be preceded by vocal prayer, or at least by the acts of a Christian," that is, by the prayers commonly prescribed for popular usage by the faithful. Art. 4: "Evening prayer will be made following the normal usage of the Congregation; but during the first month, and occasionally during the year, the acts by which it begins will be said in full...." In both these instances, in other words, the common prayers would be said out loud and together, marking a change from the Vincentian tradition.⁴⁶

Although it has not been possible to extensively study the vocal prayers of other congregations, there are indications that they followed patterns similar to those of the Congregation of the Mission. Both the Sisters

⁴³ For example, *Exercice du Chrétien* (Paris, 1692); or, somewhat later, Pierre Thiraud, *Exercice du chrétien pour la Journée, avec un abrégé des principaux mystères de la foy, et la manière de répondre à la Sainte Messe* (Fontenay, 1722).

⁴⁴ Unpublished circular, dated 21 September 1698, "Touchant les opinions relachées, et le règlement du tems des vacances pour les regents pendant qu'ils sont à la maison de Campagne," ACM Paris, collection of circulars.

⁴⁵ Edouard Robert, "Histoire de la Congrégation de la Mission," *Annales de la C.M.* 103 (1938): 647.

⁴⁶ Contassot, "Saint Vincent et les Séminaires," p. 251.

of Bon Sauveur,⁴⁷ Caen, France, and Hermit Brothers of Mont-Valérien,⁴⁸ near Paris, for example, followed patterns of life and prayer that would not have been foreign to each other, although the Sisters were an active congregation and the Brothers were contemplatives.

IV. Nineteenth Century

Throughout the nearly thirty years during which the Congregation did not exist legally in France, many of its members must have continued the practice of their daily prayers as best they could in private. Some fled to other countries and stayed in Vincentian houses in Spain or the various Italian States where traditional prayers were regularly observed. On this basis then, with the definitive restoration of the Congregation in France on 3 February 1816, many of the old customs and practices of the previous century were restored. It would take almost another thirty years, however, before more formal decisions were made.

The General Council minutes of 1844 record a decision to publish a formulary of prayers for general use.⁴⁹ It is unclear what the real motive for this was, but it may well have been the perception that incoming candidates did not share the same tradition as those of previous generations. Besides, Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M., newly elected superior general, made it his goal to restore the Congregation to its previous luster, with all its former usages. Drafts were ready for correction by the general council meeting of the following 23 December, and the volume was printed for distribution in 1845. A subsequent edition was needed and dates from 1860.⁵⁰ These editions were published in French (and Latin, where applicable) in Paris. They correspond more or less exactly to the formulary commonly in use in the Congregation until the Second Vatican Council.

In 1854, the general council took a special decision to insert "O Mary conceived without sin," said three times after the "*Veni, sancte Spiritus.*" Its purpose was to increase devotion within the Congregation to the Immaculate Conception. The form of the invocation, however, was to be one already approved by the Holy See, "*Regina sine labe concepta*" (Queen conceived without sin).⁵¹ The minutes of the general council do not reflect the clear reference to the devotion to Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal, whom this invocation was meant to honor.

⁴⁷ *Règles et Constitutions* (Coutances, France: 1733), pp. 20ff., and part three, *Cérémonial à l'Usage des Filles de la Communauté du Bon Sauveur*, pp. 46-50, for morning and evening prayer.

⁴⁸ *Règles et Constitutions des Frères Hermites du Mont-Valérien Près Paris* (Paris, 1776), pp. 95-107, which outline the order of day, without giving the text of most of the prayers.

⁴⁹ General Council minutes, Vol. I, p. 333, meeting of 24 September 1844, Archives General Curia, Rome.

⁵⁰ *Formule des Prières usitées dans la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris, 1860).

⁵¹ General Council minutes, vol. II, p. 144, meeting of 1 December 1854, AGC Rome.



Jean-Baptiste Étienne, C.M. (1801-1874).
 Fourteenth Superior General of the Congregation of the Mission.
Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

Despite attempts at standardization, the General Assembly of 1867 noted that different formularies, even very old ones, were still in use around the Congregation, and that some problems had arisen as a result through a lack of uniformity (a major concern of Father Étienne). The deputies left a decision to the prudence of the superior general and the visitors. In his circular letter after the assembly, Étienne explained in clear terms, and for the first time, the actual practice in Paris. Formerly at Saint-Lazare (and presumably elsewhere in the Congregation), he wrote, the usage was simply to have a leader indicate the time to say various acts, and then each one would pray them silently. This posed no problem since “all those entering the Congregation had habits of piety” and they were certainly able to make use of the traditional acts of prayer that they had already learned in their youth. He found, however, that in his time this was no longer the case, particularly for the brothers, and as a result he ordered that everyone follow the practice of Paris, where the prayers were said aloud.⁵²

This decree was, however, not entirely followed either. In the 1888 publication of the rules of the internal seminary, during the time of Antoine Fiat, C.M., the editors added the following sentence to the traditional expression of the Order of Day, describing the prayers to be recited by the candidates at their bedside and not in common in the chapel: “Then, kneeling, they will recite the five customary acts, *unless the usage of reciting*

⁵² Circular of 1 November 1867, *Recueil*, vol. III, p. 441.

them in common has been introduced.”⁵³ This last expression illustrates that the old system of devoting the first hour of prayer exclusively for mediation was still in use, although it is not clear where. Some spiritual notes left by Jean-Marie Aladel, C.M., confirm the existence of this old practice. They show that he followed fairly elaborate devotional practices before meditation: prayers to the Trinity, the Blessed Virgin, “by the usual prayers,” kissing the crucifix, the morning offering, consecration to God, etc.⁵⁴

Other sources also provide insight into common prayer. One is the Directory of Missions.⁵⁵ It was quite possibly the habit of reciting these prayers aloud during the course of the parish missions in France that moved members of the Community to continue that practice at home, since they were accustomed to it already. The Directory specified both morning and evening prayer, but without mentioning the contents, as if they were already known. In addition, at times the practice of singing the commandments of God and of the Church, already done by the faithful during missions,⁵⁶ may have been done in Vincentian houses. This would especially have been the case on the occasion of feasts. A further witness to the popular spread of this form of morning and evening prayer is found in the most widespread prayer book in France, the *Paroissien Romain*.⁵⁷ Although the format closely follows that employed in the Congregation, the actual text of the prayers is slightly different. In the appendix, I provide a comparison of the two formularies for morning and evening prayer.

Another source is the rules of office. The particular rules for local superiors address daily prayers, but do not go into much detail. The emphasis in these rules was on strict observance rather than on the form and content of the prayers. Chapter 3, article 7, mentions only the general examen for evening prayer, “the usual prayers” (*precibus solitis*), and the reading of the points of meditation for the next day.⁵⁸

⁵³ *Regulae Seminarii Interni* (1888), p. 15. [Italics mine.]

⁵⁴ *Vie, Vertus et Mort de M. Jean-Marie Aladel* (Paris, 1873), p. 257.

⁵⁵ “Directoire des Missions,” in *Regulae Officiorum Congregationis Missionis*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1850), p. 25. This directory noted that the prayers were customary in France, and left it to the visitors of other countries to draw up their own schedules and procedures.

⁵⁶ See Abelly, *Life*, vol. 2, chap. 1, sect. 1, pt. 3, p. 37: “He had the children sing the commandments of God to impress them more firmly on their minds.” Also, *ibid.*, p. 38: “Shepherds and farmers chant the commandments of God in the fields, and question each other on what they had heard during the mission.”

⁵⁷ One example is: *Nouveau Paroissien Romain Complet* (Imprimatur, Paris, 1901; Marseilles, 1901), pp. 1-8. Its Latin title was *Liber Usualis*, but this version did not contain the daily prayers in French. Another is the *Paroissien à l’Usage du Diocèse de Lyon* (Lyons, 1869). Although not identical to the *Paroissien Romain*, it is very similar. One major difference is a series of intercessory prayers, both morning and evening.

⁵⁸ “Regulae Superioris Localis et inferiorum Officialium,” in *Regulae Officiorum Congregationis Missionis*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1850), pp. 1-75; citation, p. 31.

A slightly different case is that of the diocesan seminaries confided to the Congregation of the Mission in the nineteenth century. The schedule and format of daily prayers paralleled in many respects those of the Congregation itself. For the sake of completeness, we should note the following: 5:30 A.M., vocal prayer followed by meditation; 8:30 P.M., evening prayer. The content of the vocal prayer for morning or evening is not defined in the *Directoire à l'Usage des Séminaires confiés aux Prêtres de la Mission*,⁵⁹ apart from the general note that all exercises were to begin with the *Veni, sancte Spiritus*, the *Ave Maria*, and finish with *Sub tuum praesidium*. Each diocese would have had some standard that was observed in its seminary. In addition, the recitation of the Rosary was scheduled for 1:45, followed by Vespers for those in Holy Orders.

In this study I have not considered the different lengthy "Acts" to be said on various occasions during the year. The earliest date from the time of Father Alméras, and were slowly added to over the centuries, before being abandoned subsequent to the gradual adoption of Lauds and Vespers as Community daily prayers in the 1960s.

V. Twentieth Century

With the increasing standardization of Vincentian life emerging from the two lengthy generalates of Fathers Étienne (1843-1874) and Fiat (1878-1914), the practice of common prayer was also fixed. The prayers to be said on arising became limited only to a practice of the Internal Seminary. Morning prayers did not follow the practice of the earliest days, but instead were those developed in the formularies of prayers written down in the nineteenth century. The dual examinations of conscience each day before meals continued to have a three-part structure: examen, prayers for the dead of the Congregation, and the Angelus. Evening prayers, however, were the closest to the old practice coming from the time of the founder himself. The most significant addition was the *Expectatio Israel*, introduced after 1884.

When the Congregation agreed to substitute the Liturgy of the Hours (Lauds in the morning, and Vespers or Compline in the evening, following the ancient practice) in place of traditional vocal prayers, this Community tradition gradually disappeared. In some few places parts of the old morning and evening prayers may still be celebrated today, and in a few more the examen is made before meals, with or without the *De Profundis*. Perhaps without realizing, the development involved some provinces returning to the old usage of the acts of faith, hope and charity in private, followed by Lauds, meditation, the Litany of the Holy Name and the Angelus. Beginning in 1961,

⁵⁹ Found in *Regulae Officiorum Congregationis Missionis*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1850), pp. 77-233.

evening prayer began as usual, continued with the general examen, the litany and *Expectatio Israel*, but concluded with Compline. After the assembly of 1963, other arrangements were made, leading up to the widespread practice of praying only Vespers, with or without the *Expectatio Israel*.⁶⁰

The new practice of using the liturgical prayer of the Church, instead of the Vincentian tradition, was concretized in the Constitutions of 1984. They speak of morning and evening prayer in the context of the Liturgy of the Hours, and specify that they are to be celebrated in common (art. 45, § 3). These Constitutions nowhere mention the traditional prayers of the Congregation. The closest they come is in the following: “We should fulfill the following spiritual practices, traditional in the Congregation, according to the community plan: first of all, reading sacred scripture, especially the New Testament; devotion to the Holy Eucharist; mental prayer made in common; examination of conscience; spiritual reading; annual retreat; and the practice of spiritual direction.” (Statute 19)



Prayer card depicting Vincent kneeling before Christ, circa 1664.
The text reads: “Good and faithful servant come and be crowned with glory.
The glory of the disciple is the glory of the master.”

Image collection of the Vincentian Studies Institute

⁶⁰ *Common Prayers. Congregation of the Mission* (n.p., 1966); unpagged pamphlet.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

The common vocal prayers of the Congregation of the Mission had deep roots in Vincentian life. They predated the Congregation, arising from the popular piety of the French Church, and apparently were taken up by Vincent de Paul for his young community. He himself knew and practiced them, but made changes to them on occasion.

He clearly distinguished between the private prayers said in the morning before meditation, and the much longer formulation to be said in connection with the general examination of conscience in the evening. This distinction was kept within the Congregation until the middle of the nineteenth century, but it was not followed during the vocal prayers said aloud morning and evening by the faithful during parish missions.

The publication of the first formularies of prayers in the nineteenth century helped to standardize the practice, but it did not entirely blur the distinction between the format of prayers said mornings and evenings. The exercise of Vincentian daily prayer which kept its original form and content was the double examination of conscience held before the two daily meals.

The full celebration of the Divine Office in common, a practice for some secular as well as religious clergy, was done only occasionally in Vincentian houses. It often conflicted with the needs of active missionaries, and hence was difficult to schedule and enforce. It was probably celebrated with more regularity in larger houses, especially houses of formation, at least for feast days. Although the Congregation decreed in its Constitutions of 1984 that many aspects of Vincentian life be observed strictly, it did not do so with morning and evening prayer. The presumption must have been that the Congregation was simply fulfilling an obligation imposed on all the faithful.

APPENDIX
*Comparison of Daily Prayers, Nineteenth Century*⁶¹

VINCENTIAN <i>Morning Prayer</i>	DIOCESAN <i>Morning Prayer</i>
Sign of the Cross (Latin)	Sign of the Cross (Latin)
<i>Veni, sancte Spiritus, V/R, Collect: Deus, qui corda fidelium</i>	<i>Veni, sancte Spiritus, V/R, Collect: Deus, qui corda fidelium</i>
<i>Regina sine labe concepta, ora pro nobis</i> (three times)	
Act of Presence of God	Act of Presence of God
Act of adoration and thanksgiving	Act of thanksgiving, and morning offering
Act of petition for day and morning offering	Act of resolution to avoid sin and practice virtue
	Act of petition for day
Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity	
Our Father (Latin)	Our Father (Latin)
Hail Mary (Latin)	Hail Mary (Latin)
Apostles' Creed (Latin)	Apostles' Creed (Latin)
Commandments of God (10) and Church [omitted in later years]	
	Confiteor (Latin), with <i>Misereatur, Indulgentiam</i>
Virgin Mary: <i>Sub tuum praesidium</i>	Virgin Mary: <i>Sainte Vierge, mère de Dieu</i>
Guardian Angel: <i>Angele Dei</i>	Guardian Angel: <i>Ange de Dieu</i>
	Patron Saint: <i>Grand Saint, dont j'ai l'honneur</i>
<i>Introduction to topic of meditation</i>	
	Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity

Morning Prayer continued on next page

⁶¹ Sources: *Formules de Prières usitées dans la Congrégation de la Mission* (Paris, 1891); *Nouveau Paroissien Romain*.

Morning Prayer continued

	Commandments of God (10) and Church
Angelus (said silently, but later said aloud), V/R and collect (<i>Regina caeli</i> in Eastertime)	
Litany of Holy Name of Jesus (Latin), V/R, and two collects: <i>Domine Jesu Christe, qui dixisti</i> , and <i>Sancti nominis tui, Domine</i> , and V/R.	Litany of Holy Name of Jesus (Latin), V/R, and two collects: <i>Domine Jesu Christe, qui dixisti</i> , and <i>Sancti nominis tui, Domine</i> , and V/R.
	Angelus, V/R and collect (<i>Regina caeli</i> in Eastertime)
Closing exhortation and blessing	

VINCENTIAN <i>Evening Prayer</i>	DIOCESAN <i>Evening Prayer</i>
Sign of the Cross (Latin)	Sign of the Cross (Latin)
<i>Veni, sancte Spiritus</i> , V/R, Collect: <i>Deus, qui corda fidelium</i>	
<i>Regina sine labe concepta, ora pro nobis</i> (three times)	
Act of presence of God, thanksgiving for the day	Act of Presence of God
	Act of thanksgiving for the day
Prayer for knowledge of sins committed	Prayer for knowledge of sins committed
<i>Examination of conscience</i>	<i>Examination of conscience</i>
Act of sorrow	Act of sorrow
	Act of resolution to avoid sin
Act of preparation for death	
	Our Father (French)
	Hail Mary (French)
	Apostles' Creed (French)
<i>Confiteor</i> (Latin) (mutual: <i>et vobis fratres</i> ; and to the priest: <i>et tibi pater</i>) [Only " <i>tibi pater</i> " in later years] and <i>Misereatur</i> after each	<i>Confiteor, Misereatur</i> (French)

Evening Prayer continued on next page

Evening Prayer continued

Absolution, V/R, and Collects: <i>Visita, quaesumus, Domine; Respice, quaesumus, Domine</i>	Absolution
Litany of Mary (Latin), V/R, collects: <i>Concede nos famulos tuos</i> ; [Easter season: <i>Regina caeli</i> in place of litany]	
	Petition for blessing of rest, recommendation to Blessed Virgin, Guardian Angel, patron saint
St. Joseph: <i>Sanctissimae Genitricis tuae Sponsi</i>	
St. Vincent: <i>Deus, qui ad salutem pauperum</i>	Acts of Faith, Hope, Charity
Guardian Angel: <i>Angele Dei</i> (or a French version of the same)	Commandments of God (10) and Church
For Departed: Psalm: <i>De Profundis</i> , V/R; Collect: <i>Deus, veniae largitor</i> ; V/R	For Departed, souls in Purgatory
Reading of subject of meditation	
	Litany of Mary (Latin), V/R, collects: <i>Concede nos famulos tuos</i> ; [Easter season: <i>Regina caeli</i> in place of litany]
	Prayer for protection
	Prayer to all the saints
Hymn: <i>Maria, Mater gratiae</i>	
Prayer for Vocations: <i>Expectatio Israel</i> (after 1884)	