

Catechism on the Liturgy: VI, 11

In times of penance the Tract follows the Gradual. The Tract calls to our minds the times, when for seventy years the Israelites dwelt in captivity on the rivers of Assyria, and wept for the deliverance of Israel. (Ez. 1.3)

'Tract' is a musical term; it relates to the mode of singing and not to the contents. There was a peculiar way of singing it that consisted of a cantor singing all the verses without any assistance from the choir, and doing so in a slow, protracted manner; uniformly and measured. The very word is from the Latin meaning to draw out or stretch.

Take for example the tracts on the Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays of Lent - days in the early church which were set aside for the strictest penance, and for those doing public penance. You will see two Versicles, but no Responsories, since there was no response of a choir.

"O Lord, deal not with us according to our sins: nor reward us according to our iniquities."

V. Remember not, O Lord, our former iniquities: let Thy mercies speedily prevent us, for we are become exceedingly poor.

V. (Genuflect) Help us O God, our Savior: and for the glory of Thy name, O Lord, deliver us; and forgive us our sins for Thy name's sake.

The Major Alleluia (when there is no Gradual or Tract) is used for the season of Eastertide, and it too has two Versicles without any Responsory. The Gradual is retained during Easter Week, but is omitted on the Saturday before Low Sunday, but after that two Alleluia's are sung, followed by two verses, each with an Alleluia. This symbolizes the Alleluia being

sung without measure to note that salvation has been purchased for us, and the way to eternal joys is open.

But the reason why the Gradual is still in Easter Week is because the reference to the faithful was almost exclusively to the newly baptized, who had risen to new life on Holy Saturday. During the whole week there were more instructions for them, and they wore white robes the whole time. The white robes were laid aside at the conclusion of the week, as was the Gradual. The Gradual lies midway if you will, between the mournful Tract and the exultant Alleluia; it denotes the laborious and difficult pilgrimage of the children of God to heaven. So at times the Gradual is put aside and gives place entirely to the Tract, when our grief of soul has reached its depths, such as on Good Friday.

At other times the Gradual is replaced by the Alleluia to show how the soul forgets the earth for a while and is rejoicing with the blessed in heaven. So using the Gradual during Easter Week showed the neophytes that for the whole term of their earthly existence, they must grow from virtue to virtue, in the midst of labors and even combats. But the date of their arrival at the New Jerusalem was signified by the end of the Gradual (the strife is done), which occurred on the octave day of their baptisms.

This is similar to the season of Septuagesima. The medieval doctors saw Septuagesima to Easter as representative of the seventy years of captivity of the Jews in Babylon, where they sat on the banks of the rivers of that kingdom and wept, longing for their home in Sion. For all these days the Alleluia is silent. The weeks of Septuagesima and Quadragesima (Lent) equal seventy days.

On certain days the mournful melody of the Tract is continued in a prolonged canticle called the Sequence. The Sequences are poems of the highest quality, composed in the Middle Ages mostly by monks. They were very numerous, but only five have been retained in the 1962 missal: *Victimae Paschali Laudes* (Easter), *Veni Sancte Spiritus* (Pentecost), *Lauda Sion* (Corpus Christi), *Stabat Mater* (Our Lady of Sorrows), and *Dies Irae* (the Requiem Mass). They are called Sequences because they follow (are sequential to) the Alleluia. And the *Stabat Mater* is used devotionally for the Stations of the Cross.

The first of these is attributed to Notker the Stammerer, who was a Benedictine monk of St. Gall in Switzerland (a wonderful place to visit by the way). The whole Church felt about him at the time that his equal was not to be found; that he was a vessel of the Holy Ghost and favored by God with the gift of divine praise for the edification of the faithful.

The *Dies Irae* is considered by many to

be the most magnificent hymn ever composed for the Church. It is a perfect work of art.

Fr. Gehr sums up the Gradual, Tract, and Alleluia with the Sequences with the following words:

"If we compare the varied form and composition of the chant intervening between the Epistle and Gospel, we cannot but admire with what refined delicacy the Church understands how to indicate and set forth the manifold dispositions and shades of the soul's interior life, from the most profound sorrow to the height of joy - as is evident from the contents as well as from the form and melody of the pieces of chant chosen by her. And thus the soul becomes ever more worthily prepared and disposed to receive the word of God, now about to be announced in the Gospel."

Now we are ready for the Gospel procession.