The Office of Tenebrae

A shorter version for family use
“Tenebrae factae sunt super universam terram,” from the Latin translation of St. Matthew’s Passion narrative, translates, “Darkness came over the whole earth.” (Matt 27:45) In the office of Tenebrae, this darkness is signified by the gradual extinguishing of candles, culminating in the removal of the final candle, representing Christ’s descent into hell.

When the light from the last candle disappears from the room, the *strepitus* begins: everyone stomps, claps, or bangs on the table, making as much noise as possible to symbolize the earthquake that occurred at the moment of Christ’s death (Matt 27:51). The noise stops when the candle returns as a symbol of Christ’s ultimate triumph.

Originally, Tenebrae was prayed on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights of Holy Week. It was a combination of two of the normal hours, Matins and Lauds. Each evening’s prayer consisted of fourteen psalms, nine readings and responsories, a Gospel Canticle, as well as other prayers; obviously too much for family prayer time! The drama of the ceremony is perfect for a young audience, though, and I hope this bite-sized version captures that for your family.

Emily MacMichael, March 2020

**Preparation:**

- Read through this booklet ahead of time. Make sure you know the songs (recordings can be found easily online) or plan to substitute more familiar songs if you wish. Other options include: Were You There, Jesus, Remember Me When You Come Into Your Kingdom, When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.
- Psalms for the Liturgy of the Hours are traditionally read antiphonally, with each side of the chapel (or, say dining room table) taking turns reading the verses. Make sure you have proficient readers seated on each side. If you have a lot of non-readers, have one or two people read the psalms together instead of alternating, and have everyone repeat the antiphons between verses, like the Responsorial Psalm at Mass.
- Make sure there’s a clear path on the floor for whoever will be processing out with the final candle. Ideally, they’ll be able to go around a corner or through a closeable door to leave the rest of you in total darkness.

**Supplies:**

- Darkness. The very name of this office means “darkness” so hold it after twilight. If you absolutely must put people to bed earlier, close the curtains and dim the room in whatever ways you can.
- Copies of this booklet for everyone to read (print them out if possible; since screens give off light).
- Seven candles. Birthday candles won’t stay lit long enough, but whatever collection of tea lights, pillars, tapers, or jar candles you have around will work. Unless you own a snuffer, you’ll need to space them so that they can easily be blown out one at a time.
Light all the candles before beginning.

Begin with the sign of the cross:
All: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Psalm 54

Antiphon: The arrogant have risen against me; the ruthless seek my life
Leader: O God, by your name save me. By your strength defend my cause.
Left Side: O God, hear my prayer. Listen to the words of my mouth.
Right Side: The arrogant have risen against me; the ruthless seek my life; they do not keep God before them.
L: God is present as my helper; the Lord sustains my life.
R: Turn back the evil upon my foes; in your faithfulness, destroy them.
L: Then I will offer you generous sacrifice and praise your gracious name, LORD,
R: Because it has rescued me from every trouble, and my eyes look down on my foes.
L: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit
R: As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.
Antiphon: The arrogant have risen against me; the ruthless seek my life

The first candle is extinguished.
Leader: Here begins the Lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah

Aleph. How lonely she is now, the once crowded city! Widowed is she who was mistress over nations; The princess among the provinces has been made a toiling slave.

Beth. Bitterly she weeps at night, tears upon her cheeks, With not one to console her of all her dear ones; Her friends have all betrayed her and become her enemies.

Ghimel. Judah has fled into exile from oppression and cruel slavery; Yet where she lives among the nations she finds no place to rest: All her persecutors come upon her where she is narrowly confined.

Daleth. The roads to Zion mourn for lack of pilgrims going to her feasts; All her gateways are deserted, her priests groan, Her virgins sigh; she is in bitter grief.

He. Her foes are uppermost, her enemies are at ease; The Lord has punished her for her many sins. Her little ones have gone away, captive before the foe.

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, be converted to the Lord your God.

The second candle is extinguished.

The third candle is extinguished.
Psalm 22

Ant: They divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots.

Leader: My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?

Right Side: Why so far from my call for help, from my cries of anguish? My God, I call by day, but you do not answer; by night, but I have no relief.

L: In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted and you rescued them. To you they cried out and they escaped; in you they trusted and were not disappointed.

R: But I am a worm, hardly human, scorned by everyone, despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they curl their lips and jeer; they shake their heads at me: “You relied on the Lord - let him deliver you; if he loves you, let him rescue you.”

L: They open their mouths against me, lions that rend and roar. Like water my life drains away; all my bones grow soft. My heart has become like wax, it melts away within me.

R: Many dogs surround me; a pack of evildoers closes in on me. So wasted are my hands and feet that I can count all my bones. They stare at me and gloat; they divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast lots.

L: But you, Lord, do not stay far off; my strength, come quickly to help me. Deliver me from the sword, my forlorn life from the teeth of the dog. Save me from the lion’s mouth, my poor life from the horns of wild bulls.

R: Then I will proclaim your name to the assembly; in the community I will praise you: “You who fear the Lord, give praise! All descendants of Jacob, give honor; show reverence, all descendants of Israel!

L: For God has not spurned or disdained the misery of this poor wretch, Did not turn away from me, but heard me when I cried out. I will offer praise in the great assembly; my vows I will fulfill before those who fear him.
R: And I will live for the Lord; my descendants will serve you.
The generation to come will be told of the Lord, that they may pro-
claim to a people yet unborn the deliverance you have brought.
L: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit
R: As it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever.
Ant: They divide my garments among them; for my clothing they cast
lots.

The fourth candle is extinguished.

Hymn

1. Ah, holy Jesus,
2. Who was the guilty!
3. For me, kind Jesus,

How hast Thou offended, That man to
Who brought this upon Thee? Alas, my
was Thy incarnation, Thy mortal

Judge Thee hath in hate pretended?
Treason, Jesus, hath undone Thee.
Sorrow, and Thy life's oblation;

By foes derided, by Thine own re-
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, it was de-
Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter

jected, O most afflicted.
nied Thee: I crucified Thee.
passion, For my salvation.

The fifth candle is extinguished.
**Gospel Canticle**

Antiphon: Save us, O Lord, in our waking, and guard us in our sleep, that we may keep watch with Christ, and rest in his peace.

*Make the sign of the cross as you begin:*

Leader: Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace,

All: according to your word,

for my eyes have seen your salvation,

which you prepared in sight of all the peoples,

a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.

Glory to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Ant: Save us, O Lord, in our waking, and guard us in our sleep, that we may keep watch with Christ, and rest in his peace.

*The sixth candle is extinguished.*

Leader: Now let us pray as Christ the Lord has taught us.

Our Father, who art in heaven,

hallowed be thy name;

thy kingdom come;

thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our trespasses

as we forgive those who trespass against us;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

Leader: Christ became obedient for us, even unto death,

All: even death on a cross.

*One person takes the final candle and processes out with it. When the room is completely dark, those who remain begin the strepitus, banging and stomping like an earthquake, for a sustained period of time, becoming silent when the candle is brought back in.*

*The final candle may be extinguished after a time of silent prayer.*