

# Guidelines on the Liturgy of the Hours

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These notes are meant to complement the article on praying the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office). They begin with an explanation of (1) the structure of the liturgy of the hours, then discuss (2) some books which can be used to pray the liturgy of the hours, and conclude with some notes on the (3) theology, and (4) history of the liturgy of the hours.

## I. Liturgy of the Hours: Structure

The structure of the hours of the Divine Office never changes much. The basic components of the two main day hours are as follows. The structure of midday prayer and compline is similar.

### Morning Prayer

Opening (invariable)

Invitatory (verse interspersed with psalm)

Hymn

Psalm (antiphon before and after, "glory be" at the end, followed by optional psalm-prayer)

Canticle (with antiphon and glory, but no psalm-prayer)

Psalm (same as first psalm)

Brief reading

Responsory

Canticle of Zechariah (Benedictus) with antiphon, glory

Our Father

Prayer

Concluding versicles (invariable)

Evening Prayer

Opening (invariable)

Hymn

Psalm (with antiphon, glory)

Psalm (with antiphon, optional psalm-prayer)

Canticle (with antiphon, glory)

Reading

Responsory

Canticle of Mary (Magnificat) with antiphon, glory

Intercessions (Bidding Prayers)

Our Father

Prayer

Conclusion (invariable)

This skeleton is filled in with text from three different parts of the liturgy. First, on ordinary days in ordinary time (when there is no feast, and outside of Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter) almost everything one needs to say the office is to be found in the section of the liturgy of the hours book

called "the ordinary." In that section there is an office for each day of the week (and sometimes for four weeks). One just says what is there and uses the prayer for the last Sunday. Secondly, there are the special liturgical seasons connected with Advent-Christmas and Lent-Easter. They use the opening and psalms and canticle from the ordinary, but have their own hymns, readings, responsory and prayers, and sometimes their own antiphons. Moreover, on the main feasts themselves (e.g., Christmas), instead of using the psalms from the ordinary, one uses special festive psalms. The special texts used for these seasons and feasts are found in the "Proper of the Seasons." Thirdly, there are special feasts of the saints. Sometimes, all one takes from the feast is the prayer, and other times the feast will have its own special hymn, antiphons, reading, and so forth. These are found in the "Proper of Saints." The saints fall into categories (apostles, martyrs, pastors, etc.) and there are some texts (the common of saints) which are shared by all the saints in that category. These are found in the "Common of the Saints." There are usually directions in the book under the saint's feast day telling you what to do.

To help you find your way around, there are annual leaflet guides for the two versions of Christian Prayer listed below. They cost about \$2.00 a year and give page numbers for each liturgical hour of each day.

## II. Praying the Liturgy of the Hours: Books

There are many forms of the liturgy of the hours. The Roman Office is used by diocesan priests, deacons, most religious orders, and many laity. Because Benedictines have their own traditions and expertise, they were allowed to prepare some general guidelines according to which individual monasteries could develop their own particular Liturgy of the Hours. Most monasteries in the United States have done that. For that reason, the liturgies of the hours used at the Monastery of the Ascension or St. Gertrude's will be different from the office in printed books and from each other.

The official Liturgy of the Hours (the Roman Office), which contains all the hours, is four volumes (one for each season of the year), and costs about \$130. It is used by diocesan priests and deacons and some laity. It is probably more than most oblates need, and it is not the place to start.

The most important parts of this official four volume Liturgy of the Hours are available in two one-volume editions, called Christian Prayer.

(1) *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours*. (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1976). About \$30.00. Black.

This book contains the complete Roman Office except for the Office of Readings (for which it gives very abbreviated versions). The book is arranged as follows:

Proper of the Seasons

Solemnities of Christ

Ordinary divided into a four-week cycle.

Proper of the Saints  
Commons (of saints, etc.)  
Office of the Dead  
Office of Readings

The book comes with a leaflet containing frequently used prayers, so that users do not have to page back and forth. The organization is perhaps more user friendly than the next version, but it is completely in black and white, so one has to get used to finding the directions amid the prayers. The publisher prints an annual guide with page directions.

(2) *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours*. (New York: Catholic Book, 1976). About \$30.00. [This publisher puts out the complete four-volume breviary, for about \$130.] Red.

The contents of this edition are the same as the previous version (1). It is printed with directions in red and in the back includes a section of hymns with music (helpful for communal praying). This version requires a bit more page turning than (1).

(3) *Shorter Christian Prayer* (New York: Catholic Book, 1988). About \$15.00. Black or red.

This is a very attractive, thin book. It is a shortened version of the two previous ones. It contains the four week cycle of the ordinary of the Roman Breviary for Morning and Evening Prayer and Compline or Night Prayer (for which it assigns different psalms each night). It has a shorted version of the proper of the seasons and the proper of the saints. Compact, it requires considerable page turning, but the directions are quite clear (red with page number references in black).

Ordinary  
Four Week Psalter (for morning and evening)  
Night Prayer  
Proper of Seasons  
Proper of Saints  
Office of the Dead  
Memorial for Blessed Virgin Mary (Saturday morning prayer)  
Hymns (without music)

(4) *The Work of God. Benedictine Prayer*. Judith Suter, OSB, ed., (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1997). \$20.00.

This book is actually a handbook for oblates. It has essays on various topics of interest to oblates, as well as a shortened form of the divine office. The book provides simple forms of morning and evening prayer over a two-week cycle. There is a night prayer (Compline) also. The book is designed to require almost no paging back and forth, and so is very easy to use. The disadvantage is that there is not a great deal of variety in the prayer texts (it offers little variations for saints of seasons), so that after using this book for a while, the user may want to graduate to one of the previous options.

(5) *The Glenstal Book of Prayer* (NY: Paulist, 2001). \$15.00. This is an attractive prayer book (mostly in English, but with Latin versions of some prayers, and even some Irish), by the Benedictine monks of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland. It is quite small, but has brief morning, evening, and night prayer for each day of the week. For someone with not much time to devote to the liturgy of hours, it is a nice option. It is also a nice starter office for a child.

### III. Liturgy of the Hours: Theology

#### Liturgy

The liturgy of the hours, like all liturgy celebrates the Paschal mystery of Christ, as a present event actualized here and now in the lives of his people. As a result, all liturgy is dialogical since Christ is both God's Word to humanity and the ultimate and absolutely faithful human response of praise, thanksgiving, self-offering, and petition. The ancient cathedral office emphasized more the response of praise; the ancient monastic offices emphasized God's Word to humanity. Both traditions emphasized morning and evening, the times of Christ's resurrection and death. Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy refers to these two dimensions of liturgy when it declares that in liturgy "God is perfectly glorified and human sanctification is signified and brought about." Let us look at the two aspects.

#### Praise

Liturgy, then, is praise of God. Vatican II said "perfect" praise. The only justification for that adjective is that in liturgy it is above all Christ who prays, Christ whose risen body is intertwined with the entire universe, and who is our brother and redeemer. Our contribution is always less than perfect. Like politics, liturgy is the art of the possible. Anyway, liturgy is praise; liturgy is meant to join us to a great chorus of praise offered by the vibration of the strings which may be the elemental constituents of matter, by the stars, by the song of birds, by the purring of a fine-tuned combustion engine. Much of the praise given God in the liturgy of the hours is drawn from the psalms and canticles of the Bible.

Praise doesn't seem very productive. One can accomplish much by praising and supporting people. But God? Merton's description is apt: prayer of praise is "drifting fires that glorify the name of God, while they fall earthward and die away in the night wind." Praise is like a skyrocket. That metaphor is helpful. Although liturgical praise doesn't build up God or build anything else, it illumines brilliantly. In its light we see all as gift; in its warmth our love of God is nurtured.

#### Human Sanctification

Liturgy is praise and human sanctification, "the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit" (Vat II, Liturgy, #14). Sanctification is putting on Christ, taking seriously our baptismal mission to bring about the Kingdom of God. The liturgy teaches us about Christ; the liturgy of the hours inserts its teaching through the day. The psalms were Jesus' prayer at synagogue, temple, and meals. Some early Christians liked to pray the psalms with Jesus, to imagine that he was saying the psalms they were reading or saying. Thus,

for example, Psalm 88 is said on Friday, because it can be read as Christ's prayer at the time of his passion. It is said on Good Friday:

Lord my God, I call out by day;  
at night I cry aloud in your presence.  
For my soul is filled with troubles;  
my life draws near to Sheol.  
I am reckoned with those who go down to the pit;  
I am weak, without strength....  
You plunged me into the bottom of the pit,  
into the darkness of the abyss.  
Your wrath lies heaven upon me;  
all your waves crash over me.

This psalm is traditionally said by those who are very sick. We can say it for and with them.

Being Present through Time.

The liturgy guides us through the life of Christ, Advent to Easter to the Final Coming. The invitatory antiphons are signposts on this journey: "Come let us worship the king who is to come." "Christ is born for us, come let us adore him." "Come, let us worship Christ the Lord who for our sake endured temptation and suffering." "The Lord is risen, alleluia!"

The liturgy of the hours is itself the result of almost two thousand years of development. Although there have been changes and variations and reforms throughout the centuries the liturgy is like the Bible: a vast edifice of texts which grew organically over time. Like a beautiful Italian village, the liturgy of the hours contains lovely constructions from every era. The liturgy of the hours is interspersed through day. Time itself does not need sanctifying, but we need to remember. The attentiveness to which the liturgy of the hours calls us is what we strive for at all times. The human capacity for forgetting is astounding; it takes strong measures to counteract it. This involves remembering the story of salvation told in the Bible, remembering the presence of God, remembering to be grateful.

In the twenty-first century, Christians are very much like anthropologists studying a strange tribe in the jungle. We are in danger of going native in the consumer culture around us. To avoid that, we need to stay in touch with our primary culture, the culture of our faith. The liturgy of the hours establishes such contact.

Again, when people get married, or go on a trek, or sign on to work on a common project, they have to adjust the rhythms of life to each other and the common project. By baptism we have entered into a covenant with God, and a common project with Christ. The liturgy of the hours adjusts our schedules to this covenant.

## Psalms

The psalms are poetry, multilayered and evocative, capable of expressing many moods and seasons of human life. As poetry, they also invite us to see and feel differently, with people who have been deeply touched by God. They do this slowly, imperceptibly, over months and years.

They are the prayers of our fathers and mothers in the faith and of Jesus. An objective content and structure, which carries us like a wave, giving freedom and impetus. The psalms function as Kafka said books should do, as "a hatchet for the frozen sea inside us." They remind us that our feelings and our perspective is neither central nor adequate to the reality which lies around us.

## Prayer as Dialogue

God speaks, we listen, meditate, respond. Hence need for quiet, reverent atmosphere (when possible), and for periods when there is quiet (e.g., after a psalm or reading).

## Movement, Gesture, Symbol, Song.

Because the liturgy of the hours is liturgy, it needs to involve more than words. Movement, as simple as sitting, rising, bowing, standing; gestures like the sign of the cross or turning toward the altar; symbols, like incense, or enthroning an icon or crucifix; song.

## Restoring the Liturgy of the Hours

Vatican II hoped that there would be revival of lay participation in the liturgy of the hours. It seems that this is finally beginning to happen. However, there is great need to ground this fragile revival on the solid basis: appreciation of the liturgy of hours as a way to sanctify our lives across time and as a way to praise God and intercede for the sanctification of the world. Sometimes the liturgy of the hours will be prayed privately, sometimes it will be recited, sometimes it will be done as a full liturgy. The latter is the ideal, but frequency, regularity, and extension to as many Christians as possible are the most important consideration. Many people will have to pray the liturgy of the hours alone some or all of the time. However, small groups can gather during lunch at the university Catholic center as happens in at one state university I know, people can pray the office together in the morning before Mass or the communion service, and a family can pray Compline together.

## Communal Celebration

When a group says the liturgy of the hours together, it is desirable to divide up roles. One person on each side can be the one who intones (says the first clause or line of an antiphon or psalm). Another may be reader. Another the one who leads the responsories and says the prayer at the end. How roles are divided up depends in part on how many people are present.

In general, standing symbolizes the resurrection, and so Christians who say the office together stand during the hymn, the Gospel canticles (Magnificat, Benedictus) and the orations. Sitting

symbolizes receptivity, and so one sits during the readings. Kneeling has a penitential significance and is more frequent during Lent.

All liturgy should have some time for silent prayer. Liturgical recitation or chanting should be done at a measured pace. The goal is to be absorbed by the words, not race through them.

Finally, to help people know what particular office to say on a given day there are annual guides ("ordos"). Some of these can be found on the Internet. Individuals, however, should be assured that it is far more important that they pray the liturgy of the hours, than that they get the exact pages right.

#### IV. Liturgy of the Hours: History

The origins of the liturgy of the hours are obscure. In NT times Jews prayed the Shema (Deut 6.4-9; 11.13-21; Num 15.37-41) morning and evening, and other Benedictions three times daily. Acts indicates that the early Christians said these prayers, privately or in the synagogue or temple. The Didache (8.2-3) and the First Letter of Clement (40.1-4) indicate that by the early second century Christians gathered to pray at set times of the day. Whether there was continuity between their practice and that of the Jews is not known, but it seems some continuity was likely. In any case during the next two centuries it became common Christian practice to pray at dawn, three times during the day, at nightfall, and during the night. The morning and evening prayers were the most emphasized. Biblical psalms and canticles and hymns were used. There was a ritual of lighting a lamp (symbolic of Christ) at evening prayer. Prayers were usually said facing East, for the rising sun also symbolized Christ. The day hours were sometimes related to moments in Christ's passion.

With the peace of Constantine, morning and evening prayer could be celebrated publicly. Evening prayer began with a light service; a hymn and psalms and canticles were prayed, incense was ceremonially burned during it; intercessions were offered, and a blessing concluded. Many churches had a vigil on Saturday night which included a reading of a gospel account of the resurrection. The content and structure did not vary much. Not all psalms were said; those used were given a Christological interpretation.

By contrast to this liturgy of the hours used in cathedral churches, the monks of Egypt said psalms and read the bible throughout the day in order to achieve ceaseless prayer. According to Cassian, the fourth century monks of lower Egypt met together to pray in the morning and evening, weekly or daily. Twelve psalms were read in biblical order by a soloist and there were prostrations, and prayers, responsorial psalmody, biblical readings. The Pachomian monks of upper Egypt listened to passages from the Bible, then rose, said the Our Father, prayed in silence, then sat for another reading, repeating this pattern perhaps six times.

Other monks lived in cities and towns. Their liturgy of the hours meshed with the offices of the cathedral churches, so that a hybrid office developed, which was decisive in shaping liturgy of the hours throughout the Christian world to include the traditional seven or eight daily offices. Local

churches developed variations which persist to this day in the Eastern churches (Armenian, Chaldean, Syro-Antiochene, etc.).

Of the Western forms of the liturgy of the hours, only the Roman rite survives today (though Benedictine monasteries and congregations have developed their own forms of the office after Vatican II). More than in the Eastern churches, the monastic office dominated, so that few traces of the non-monastic offices survive. St. Benedict drew on the office in the Rule of the Master and on the Roman basilican office. His office in turn influenced the Roman office. By the ninth century the Roman office had the form it kept until Vatican II. As a result of monastic influence, the Roman office was quite long and not suited for public, parochial liturgy. Among non-monastic clergy it was usually said privately, even though it was designed for use in community by monks. During the Middle Ages both the monastic (Benedictine) office and the Roman office were augmented by various prayers and devotions. For clergy who said the office privately, breviaries containing all the texts and directions for the office became popular. Breviaries made it possible to say several hours of the office one right after the other, which undercut the idea of the liturgy of the hours as a periodic turning to God during the day. From 1350-1550 many lay people had books of hours, which contained shortened versions of the liturgy of hours and other prayers suitable for lay use. Some of these books were in Latin, others in the vernaculars or in a mixture of Latin and vernacular. Around the time of the Council of Trent and after there were attempts to produce a form of the liturgy of the hours more suited to the private prayer of the clergy. Paradoxically, the one reform of the liturgy of the hours to be preeminently successful was that of Bishop Cranmer of the Church of England, which gave the forms of office based on the rite of the diocese of Salisbury (Sarum) and on a revised liturgy of the hours prepared by Quignon. His morning and evening offices were included in the Book of Common Prayer. The Roman office was revised several times in the course of the twentieth century. A very successful office has been developed by the ecumenical monastery of Taizé in France. It has morning and evening prayers which include introduction, psalms, reading, response, silence, hymn, intercession collect, free prayer, general collect, and blessings. This office also includes simple little hours and Compline, and vigils for Saturday evening and feasts.

Sources:

*Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy*

Janet Baxendale, "Spiritual Potential of the Liturgy of the Hours," *Origins* 23 (Nov 11, 1993)

Stanislaus Campbell, F.S.C., "Hours, Liturgy of," in Fink, *New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, 562-576 (with bibliography).