

The Liturgy of The Hours



Part 1

The work of the people of God

What do we understand by the word “liturgy?” If someone says that she has just returned from a liturgy, would we ever stop to ask exactly what kind of liturgy it was in which she had taken part? Most Catholics would not ask because we have come to think that liturgy means the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, celebrations of the anointing of the sick in a hospital room, of the sacrament of reconciliation in a confessional or chapel and the distribution of ashes outside Mass are all liturgies.

This bulletin supplement and the three which will follow explore still another liturgy which has traditionally played an important role in Catholic prayer, namely, the Liturgy of the Hours. “The what?” you say! You say you’ve never heard this term and you have no idea what it has to do with Sunday Mass.

The widespread ignorance of this public prayer form bears witness to its disappearance over the centuries as the daily prayer of all Christians. Yet Christians of the first three centuries would have been as familiar with this liturgical prayer form as they were with the Sunday Eucharist. Reduced to its simplest expression the Liturgy of the Hours is Christian Morning and Evening Prayer.

Early Christians did not call their domestic prayer at the rising and setting of the sun the Liturgy of the Hours, nor do most small groups of Christians today

who gather for prayer at the beginning and end of their work day. The name is not the issue; framing the day in prayer is. Christians hold this in common with men and women of other religious traditions in every age and culture.

Even in a technological world where we can control light and heat as never before in history, no one of us is immune to the effects of the rising and setting of the sun, the promise of a new day, our thanksgiving and sense of repentance at its ending, the hopeful anticipation of the next dawn. Over the centuries Jews and Christians have brought to these sentiments the word of God so that dawn and dusk become privileged signs of God’s abiding presence shaping our daily lives. And yet in modern times we seem to have lost our ability to mark these times with prayer. Can the Liturgy of the Hours help us to recapture these special moments of prayer?

This question returns us to our original inquiry: what do we mean by *liturgy*. The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek *leitourgia* which in turn is derived from two more basic Greek words: *laos* which means people (we also get the word laity from this root) and *ergon* which means work (this root is also found in the English word *energy*).

Liturgy is a work, a work of the people. In Greek society it referred especially to works done for the

good of the whole people, for example, the building of a bridge.

Whenever we, the People of God, come together for the Church's official public prayer we do that work which is for our own good and the good of all the world, namely, the praise of God to which all our other words and works are directed. This is liturgy.

In the course of the centuries what was the prayer-work of *all* the people came to be seen more and more as the work of *some* of the people, namely, the clergy. Catholics never ceased to pray in the morning and at night but these prayers were said in private. The public celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer, like the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments, became more and more the work of priests and religious.

The renewal of the Catholic Church in our age is in large part a movement to recapture *leitourgia*, public prayer, as the work of *all* God's baptized People. The restoration of public Morning and Evening Prayer (the latter sometimes also called Vespers) is a small but important part of that effort.

"What's in it for me?" you ask. Only the individual can answer that question. If this is really liturgy, however, we can ask what's in it for the Church. That brings us back to the fact that many Catholics have come to identify liturgy with Mass. That is somewhat like identifying all meals with Thanksgiving dinner. Human beings, among all God's creatures, are the most remarkable eaters. We will try almost anything and we have the broadest diet of any animal on earth. So it is with the diet of our spiritual life. The same liturgical diet is as uninteresting as an unchanging dinner menu. Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours are not opposed to one

another any more than Sunday brunch is opposed to Christmas dinner. In fact, each makes the other richer.

The Liturgy of the Hours provides the Church with a broader and richer offering of scripture and symbol, a greater range of possibility to praise God and to make intercession for the needs of all creation. The Liturgy of the Hours is, in fact, *leitourgia* for the entire world. When Pope Paul VI issued new rites for this celebration he pointed out that the Church as a community is united to Christ both as spouse and as intercessor before God for the welfare of the world. The Liturgy of the Hours has some key elements which flow from this relationship. They are:

1. A connection to time

The rising and setting of the sun, our pause at noon, prayer before bed, and occasional night vigil are all moments which lead us to praise God for the gift of light and to make petition for divine protection in any darkness which besets us.

2. Praise

God is praised in hymns, psalms and scriptural canticles of praise in addition to psalms of lament and remorse.

3. Proclamation

The Word of God is proclaimed from Scripture.

4. Intercession

In Morning and Evening Prayer, prayers of intercession are offered for the needs of the world.

Our appreciation for Sundays and seasons, feasts of the Lord, Mary, and the saints is by no means exhausted by what we proclaim, hear, and celebrate at Mass. In fact, our celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours can only help to deepen our appreciation for the rich tradition that is our Catholic faith.

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Part 2

O Radiant Light

Why is it that notoriously late sleepers who usually need to be dynamited out of bed in the morning will get up early on vacation to climb a mountain or go to the beach to watch the sunrise?

Why is it that twentieth-century men and women of all ages will make special efforts to go to a bay or a cliff to watch in silence as the sun slowly sets below the horizon?

Why will people who could not imagine life without electricity spend money to camp in the woods where they live by the light and heat of the sun and the campfire?

And why will children express a special sense of excitement when a storm cuts off power to their homes and their parents need to light candles?

In one sense we will never be able to get to the bottom of these experiences because God's gift of the sun and our God-given power to make fire will never be completely understandable. We call these realities mysteries—not because we can't figure them out but because they affect our lives so deeply that their meaning is boundless.

It is these natural mysteries that Jesus and the Church have established as signs of God's life among us. When the word of God brings another level of meaning to the natural mystery of its setting, these daily events in the heavens and in our places of prayer are seen to be symbols of Christ the Sun of Justice, the true light that can

never be extinguished. Morning and Evening Prayer are rooted in these mysteries and their power to communicate Christ's life.

Morning and Evening Prayer always open with a hymn of praise. One of the oldest hymns known to us, *O Radiant Light*, praises Christ, the image of God's heavenly light. This hymn has been used at Evening Prayer in the Eastern Churches for more than 1300 years.

Psalms, the poetic music of the Bible, are a very important element in the celebration of the Hours. They are perhaps the best expression of the wide range of religious sentiments which form part of our ongoing conversation with God.

The first psalm of Morning Prayer almost always makes reference to the dawn; the third is always a song of praise. At Evening Prayer the first psalm frequently contains some sentiment of repentance which expresses our awareness that we have not responded perfectly to the graces of the day. The psalm helps us celebrate the loving forgiveness of God. Both Morning and Evening Prayer normally use two psalms and another biblical canticle: one from the Old Testament in the morning and one from the New Testament in the evening.

After the chanting or recitation of the psalms and canticle there is a reading from the Scriptures. This is

followed by silent reflection and/or a responsory. On special occasions there can also be a brief homily.

In the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Word leads into the center and summit of the entire celebration, namely, the assembly's proclamation of the eucharistic prayer. At Morning and Evening Prayer our proclamation of the word climaxes in the assembly's chanting of canticles from the Gospel of Luke: the Cantic of Zechariah at Morning Prayer; the Cantic of Mary at Evening Prayer. As for all proclamations of the Gospel, we stand for this event. In more solemn celebrations incense may be used to reverence the altar and the assembly during these proclamations of the Gospel canticles.

As in the Eucharist, our remembrance of God's story in the scriptural readings leads to intercession for the welfare of all creation. Remembrance of God's mighty deeds gives birth to confidence, and confidence gives rise to petition. One of the most important theological reasons for the restoration of the Liturgy of the Hours is the Gospel command that we express our union with Christ the High Priest interceding forever for the life of the world at the throne of God's mercy. The world needs our prayers. We need to pray for the world in order to become more attentive to working for the peace and healing for which we pray.

The last intercession at morning and Evening Prayer is that prayer which is the rule and guide for all intercession, the prayer which Jesus taught us, the Our Father.

We conclude with the prayer of the day, a final blessing and dismissal which sends us out to continue our liturgy of praise and intercession in the world. Thus the basic shape of Morning and Evening Prayer is:

- Introductory Verse and Response
- A Hymn of Praise
- Psalmody (2 psalms and a canticle)
- A Reading from Scripture
- Silent Reflection
- Optional Responsory
- Optional Brief Homily
- Gospel Cantic
- General Intercessions
- The Lord's Prayer
- The Prayer of the Day
- Blessing
- Dismissal

In the next supplement we will look more closely at the biblical texts we use to celebrate God's gift of Christ, the Light of the world. This might give you the impression that the Liturgy of the Hours is simply a matter of singing or reciting hymns, psalms, canticles, other texts of scripture and prayers of the Church. Not if it is good liturgy. The work of the people is truly work if it engages the whole person. We pray with our bodies as well as with our minds. In the fourth and last supplement, we will look at other symbols and gestures that help to make Morning and Evening Prayer authentic liturgy.

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Part 3

Sing a New Song

Music is at the heart of human ritual celebration, and Catholic liturgy is ritual prayer. To celebrate the liturgy is to sing the liturgy. Simply to recite any liturgy runs the risk of trivializing rites that are meant to identify us to ourselves and to others.

An unfortunate consequence of our high tech culture is a reduced ability to make music. Electronic gadgets are so good at making music for us that more and more we have become a passive audience rather than active performers. In many cases even the National Anthem is sung for us. A musical liturgy is countercultural because it goes against our growing tendency simply to listen to music.

A musical liturgy also witnesses to the fact that we have something to sing about. Singing the liturgy is an exuberant profession of belief. Song is a powerful communal self-expression and witness. A well sung liturgy is a strong and effective instrument of evangelization.

Every time we gather to celebrate the Eucharist we pray the psalms. After we have heard the first reading we sing or recite the responsorial psalm which, like the other readings, is taken from the Bible. The Book of Psalms has traditionally been called the Church's prayer book.

From the time of their composition in ancient Israel to the present day these poetic texts have been an essential part of common prayer in Judaism and Christianity.

Even though there are other biblical books which are hardly ever used in common prayer, the psalms—virtually every one of the 150—are some of the most consistently and frequently used texts in our liturgy. Psalm 23, the Good Shepherd psalm, is a good example.

The enduring popularity of the psalms is rooted in their potential as poetry to express and shape the deep emotions of Jews and Christians in their relation to God, to one another and to all creation. The Gospels are filled with references to the psalms, and Jesus himself is depicted as praying these powerful texts. On the cross he cried out the words of Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

The English word *psalm* comes from a Greek word meaning *to sing to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument*. The psalms are songs and therefore should be sung.

O God, I will sing a new song to you;
with a ten-stringed lyre I will chant your praise
.... (Ps 144:9)

Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving;
sing praise with the harp to our God.
(Ps 147:7)

Some psalms have a privileged place in the tradition of singing the Liturgy of the Hours. The Church invites us again to make these poetic songs of faith a regular part of our prayer, even when we are praying alone.

The following are some examples.

Psalm 95:1,7, a call to worship and obedience, has opened the Church's public prayer each day for centuries:

Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord;
let us acclaim the Rock of our salvation ...
O that today you would hear his voice.

Every Friday morning, the day of Christ's crucifixion and death, the first psalm at Morning Prayer is the Church's most commonly sung prayer of repentance. It is Psalm 51:3, a prayer for cleansing and pardon.

Have mercy on me, O God, in your goodness;
in the greatness of your compassion
wipe out my offence.

Other psalms that deserve to become part of our prayer and perhaps be committed to memory are: Psalm 63, which is sung at Morning Prayer on every feast and solemnity of the church year, and Psalm 141, the evening incense psalm—a prayer of preservation from evil.

The Liturgy of the Hours also employs Old Testament and New Testament canticles. The word *canticle* comes from the Latin word *cantare* (to sing). Every day for centuries the Gospel Cantic of Zechariah (Lk 1:68–79) has ushered in the dawn of God's new day:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for he has visited and brought
redemption to his people. (Lk 1:68)

Likewise Mary's song of praise (Lk 1:46–55) has been sung every day at the setting of the sun:

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my savior.
(Lk:1:46)

Each of the different units of the Liturgy of the Hours, e.g., Morning and Evening Prayer, begins with a hymn. In fact a large percentage of the hymns written for Catholic worship before the Second Vatican Council, (e.g., the collection of hymnody written by Saint Ambrose at the end of the fourth century), were written for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. The Church's most traditional hymn at Evening Prayer, *O Radiant Light*, is one of the oldest hymn texts in Christian history.

Hymns, psalms, and canticles comprise about 75% of all the words we pray in the Liturgy of the Hours. They are texts which are by their very nature musical.

When we looked at the shape of Morning and Evening Prayer we reflected on the fact that at these services, as in the Eucharist, our proclamation of the word of God has the power to shed light within our hearts. This leads us to a deeper sense of our own and others' needs, and so we make intercession for ourselves and for all creation.

Our intercessory prayer takes the form of a litany. Litanies lend themselves very easily to musical performance because the assembly has a very short and simple sung response to the petitions. The intercessions are completed by the prayer that Jesus taught us, the Lord's Prayer. If there is one prayer that can be sung easily and well by virtually every Catholic, it is the Our Father.

When we take a thorough look, therefore, at the texts of the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning and Evening Prayer, we come to the conclusion that 90% of the texts are meant to be sung; many of them can be quite easily. The others are within our capability and deserve our effort.



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Part 4

Prayer—A Way of Being

In the previous supplement we took a look at the essentially musical nature of the texts we use in the liturgy. In this final supplement we will look at the engagement of the rest of our body (from the head down) in liturgical prayer in general and, more specifically, in the Liturgy of the Hours.

Prayer is a way of being. Prayer is the way we are in conversation with God. Anything we hold back makes the prayer a less than fully open dialogue. Our emotions and bodies are an essential part of who we are; our bodies express and shape our emotions.

A young man may kneel before a young woman to propose marriage. It is a dramatic gesture, but it speaks as effectively as the words he uses. Similarly the body-at-prayer has traditionally assumed certain fitting postures in connection with particular liturgical prayers. Let us consider two examples:

1. In the liturgy we are always directed to pray the Lord's Prayer while standing. This suggests that Jesus Christ calls us to pray to our Father in heaven not as slaves but as free children of God.
2. Every time the Gospel is proclaimed among us we stand in a position of attentive listening. All other stories of faith lead to it and flow from this narrative of Jesus' life and teaching. This posture expresses our belief that the Gospel is at the

heart of all our stories. We are seated for all other readings.

In addition to posture there is movement in the body-at-prayer. Catholic worship is processional. At least once in every celebration of the Eucharist most Catholics move towards the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. A procession of ministers usually opens and concludes the celebration of the Eucharist. There is often a procession of gifts. On certain occasions, such as the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, Ash Wednesday, Passion Sunday and the Easter Vigil, the entire assembly takes part in the procession. More solemn celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours hold the same possibilities: opening and concluding processions of ministers, the movement of ministers who incense the altar and the assembly, occasionally a Gospel procession and the possible procession of all the assembly to the baptistry on the occasion of the solemn Easter Vigil.

The following schema indicates the postures and gestures suggested by the General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours for the celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer.

Opening Versicle and response—stand.

The hymn—stand.

The psalmody—all sit.

The reading, silent reflection, optional responsory and/or homily—all sit.

The Gospel canticle—all stand.

The general intercessions, Lord's Prayer and prayer of the day—all stand.

The blessing and dismissal—all stand.

If prayer is our ongoing conversation with God, then Catholic ritual prayer, the liturgy, is of its nature a dialogue. The dialogue between the assembly and its liturgical ministers mirrors our dialogue with God. This makes some specific demands on the nature of liturgical ministries and worship space.

Since the Liturgy of the Hours is real liturgical prayer, ministries for this liturgy are similar to those for the celebration of the Eucharist. The celebration involves minimally a presider, lector, and cantor(s). Depending upon the circumstances, the list of ministers could also include an assistant to the presider, acolyte(s) and/or liturgical musicians (instrumentalists and schola or choir).

Since the dialogue between the assembly and its ministers is an image of our eternal dialogue with God, the ministers are placed face to face with the assembly. The lector proclaims the reading from the ambo (lectern, pulpit); cantors sing where all can see them; and the presider is situated in a notable place to lead the community in prayer.

Ideally, the members of the assembly should be arranged so that they can face each other while singing hymns, psalms, and canticles. This is most fitting because each individual's performance of these texts is also a proclamation of God's word to the other members.

The primary minister is always the assembly which is, through baptism, the Body of Christ. Particular liturgical ministers are first members of the assembly whose prayer they facilitate by and through their specific liturgical ministry.

We finish where we began—the whole person at prayer. Liturgical prayer is of its nature from and of the body. We pray with our senses, not only with our ears, but with our eyes and hands. Baptism cannot be celebrated without water for bathing; the Eucharist without bread and wine for eating and drinking; anointing of the sick without oil. Baptism, confirmation, reconciliation, anointing, marriage, and ordination call for the laying on of hands.

The revival of the Liturgy of the Hours will not be fully successful without a renewed sense of the sacramentality of matter within its celebration. The vesting of ministers, the lighting of candles at Evening Prayer, and the use of incense at Morning and Evening Prayer are important symbols suggested by the *General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*.

For almost 1300 years the full ritual celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours has been the preserve of monasteries and some cathedrals, though some ethnic traditions are known to have celebrated Sunday Vespers (Evening Prayer) until well into this century.

The full renewal of Catholic worship in our own time cannot rest upon the reformed celebration of the Eucharist alone. Providing for at least Sunday and seasonal celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours as the right and responsibility of all the baptized is part of the unfinished liturgical agenda.

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