

Liturgy of the Hours

Also known as the Divine Office, the Liturgy of the Hours is the Church's way of consecrating the entire day and night by proclaiming the praises of God at regular, set times. "It is the very prayer which Christ Himself, together with His body, addresses to the Father" (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, #84).

The Acts of the Apostles testifies that communal prayer was a key element for the early Christians. After Christ's Ascension, the disciples devoted themselves to prayer (1:14). They prayed before choosing a replacement for Judas (1:24). Prayer was one of the four basic actions of the community (2:42-47). The community sang prayers of praise to God when Peter and John were released by the Sanhedrin (4:23-31). In prison, Paul and Silas prayed at about midnight (16:25). The Church has continued this tradition of communal prayer at various times of the day throughout its history.

The two key Hours are Morning and Evening Prayer (formerly, Lauds and Vespers) – they are the hinges on which the day turns. Three Daytime Hours are provided – Midmorning, Midday, and Mid-afternoon Prayer (formerly Terce, Sext and None – the 3rd, 6th and 9th hours of a day that starts at 6 AM). The Hour to be used is the one nearest to the time the person is praying – 9 AM, Noon, or 3PM. Night Prayer (formerly Compline) is usually said at or after 9 PM. The Office of Readings (formerly Matins, traditionally prayed during the night in monasteries) may be prayed at any time.

Each Hour follows this general structure:

- A hymn;
- Three psalms or selections from Psalms; at Morning and Evening Prayer, canticles (songs of praise) from the Bible are used for one of the three;
- A Scripture reading; and
- Intercessory prayers.

Two popular devotions are related to the Divine Office. The Rosary's 150 Hail Marys (over 3 sets of mysteries) were the people's substitute for the monks' 150 Psalms. The Angelus began as a prayer the people said while the monks prayed Compline; it later advanced to 6 PM. The Angelus at 6 AM was when the monks prayed Prime, the day's first Hour. The noontime Angelus developed later as a reminder of the Crucifixion.

Whether celebrated in common or recited individually, the Liturgy of the Hours is a conversation between God and man. Celebration in common shows its ecclesial nature more clearly and is to be preferred whenever possible. It is also preferable to sing rather than merely recite the Hours, as opportunity offers.

Although only those in Holy Orders are required to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, all are encouraged to celebrate some of it, "for it is the prayer of the Church and makes the whole Church ... one in heart and soul" (*General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*, #32). The *Shorter Christian Prayer* edition has Morning, Evening and Night Prayers.

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly,
as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another,
singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs
with gratitude in your hearts to God. (Col 3:16)*