

# The Liturgy of The Hours

*Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive  
power and wealth  
wisdom and might  
and honour,  
and glory and blessing*

(Revelations 4:12)

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The Divine Office used to be a prayer for priests, deacons approaching ordination, monks and some religious only.

### **Bits and pieces from the past**

It was recited in Latin and had all sorts of strings attached to it. In the Benedictine tradition it was called the *opus Dei* (the work of God). But many priests saw it more as *onus Dei/diei* (the burden of God or the burden of the day). The recitation of the Office was regarded as a serious commitment under grave sin. To leave out an integral part would be seen as a mortal sin – this could be as little as three or five minutes. It gave rise to a lot of scrupulosity: it was so important, there were many possibilities of committing sin when fulfilling this obligation. Pope Leo X (1513-1521), he of indulgence selling fame, gave a kind and merciful decree whereby a person saying a short prayer, *Sacrosanctae*, would have any sins or faults arising from personal frailty remitted – there was a similar indulgence, attached to the prayer *Obsecro*, for faults committed in saying Mass granted by Pope St Pius X in 1912. The Office had to be completed by midnight; one calculated to one's advantage what that was. In the east of Ireland, true solar midnight during summertime was 12.25am, but in the west it was 12.35am. Before Vatican II the Holy See often gave a priest seeking secularization a choice of being dispensed from one vow: celibacy or the obligation to the Divine Office. One heard of stories of the father getting the children to bed so that he could pull down the breviary for about an hour's prayer. There were many stories too of priests sitting on the bumper of their car finishing the Office by its headlights. From this we can conclude that the Office was a serious obligation that was at times a burden. Not only was it in Latin, but the psalm texts were of an ancient translation whose meaning was often unclear, especially where verbs were concerned. St Jerome made a fine translation to replace this faulty one in AD 400. But monks that had already had to learn off by heart the Psalter of 150 psalms were not prepared to learn a new one, so the faulty translation was in use until after Vatican II; I had it for the first eighteen years of my Carmelite life. I had honours Latin in the Leaving Certificate, but the Office only made sense to me in bits, a verse or a sentence here and a verse or sentence there. St Thérèse of Lisieux and thousands of nuns just read the Latin, with no real clue what they were saying.

At the most basic level, saying the Office for priests was an obligation; by fulfilling it they avoided mortal sin; by adding the prayer *Sacrosanctae* they had faults in recitation remitted. You might guess from all this that there was a real problem about actually praying the Office. We knew it was prayer, the prayer of the Church. But how much of ourselves would there be in it? Distractions were endemic. All that one could expect would be a general sense of worship during its recitation, and whatever devout thought might come, from wherever – not necessarily from the actual text.

### **History**

This is the recent history of the Divine Office. But it had a much longer history. It has had several names. There are three names all referring to the same reality: *Liturgy of the Hours*; *Divine Office*; *Breviary* [a compendium].

The Liturgy of the Hours is an ancient liturgical form whose origins stretch back to Jewish worship before the time of Jesus and his disciples. The core of the Liturgy of the Hours is the Old Testament Book of Psalms: 150 poems which span the whole range of forms of prayer. Some psalms praise God's goodness and justice, others cry out to him for help in times of

sadness and trouble, others are hymns of thanksgiving. These ancient prayers were recited or chanted in prayer by the Jews at the time of Christ. Probably Jesus and his disciples often prayed the psalms together. Certainly, Jesus often uses phrases from the psalms in the Gospels. In the earliest centuries of the Church, the first Christians continued the Jewish practice of praying the psalms. In keeping with St Paul's advice to "pray without ceasing" (1Thessalonians 5:17) the early Christians paused when they rose, at midday, and before going to bed to pray – often using the psalms as their text. Hippolytus gave the following advice to Christian laymen in his *Apostolic Tradition* around 200 AD: "If you have a wife, pray the psalms, alternating verses with her. If you have a wife but she is not yet a believer, go apart by yourself and pray alone, and come back to your place with her."

With the monasteries and earlier in the Desert Fathers long prayer forms evolved based on the psalms. With St Benedict (about AD 550) there was some standardisation: the 150 psalms were said over a week. The day was marked by prayer periods, called "hours:"

- Lauds Morning Prayer offered at sunrise,
- Prime 1<sup>st</sup> hour of the day,
- Terce 3<sup>rd</sup> hour, or Mid-morning,
- Sext 6<sup>th</sup> hour or Midday,
- None 9<sup>th</sup> hour or Mid-Afternoon,
- Vespers Evening Prayer offered at sunset,
- Compline Night Prayer before going to bed.

In addition, the monks arose to read and pray during the Night. This Office of Matins (Readings) likewise had its divisions, into nocturnes, corresponding to the beginning of each of the "watches of the night" (Ps. 63:6), that is, 9.00pm, midnight and 3.00am. When I was growing up in Harold's Cross, we could hear the bells of Mount Argus going at 2.00am for the Matins.

Vatican II simplified this monastic Office leaving two major hours: Morning and Evening Prayer as the prayer hinges of the day, and one minor hour, Night Prayer. Those deputed to say the Office have another two hours: Prayer during the Day and the Office of Readings.

### **Heart of Liturgy of Hours: the Psalms**

The core of the Liturgy of the Hours is the Old Testament book of 150 Psalms. They are prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit. Since God has inspired them, we are using God's words to pray to God.

The Psalms cover the whole range of human experience. Thus there are:

- Psalms of praise, e.g. Psalms 8 and 19.
- Psalms of lament, expressing needs = praise, need, "help!" reasons why God should act, a promise or a vow. Thanksgiving as if favour were already granted, e.g. Psalms 13; 25; 27.
- Wisdom Psalms, e.g. Psalms 1; 14; 119.
- Royal Psalms about David [later Messiah].
- Liturgical Psalms, e.g. Psalms 15; 134.
- Historical Psalms, e.g. Psalms 78; 105 and 106.

As we say the psalms we will often be struck by particular verses. We are becoming familiar with many of the psalms through their use at Mass, which has a Responsorial Psalm after the first reading, and verses of psalms used at other times to point up some feature of a day's

celebration. If we were to ask, ‘what if the psalms do not fit into my life today, or at this time?’ The answer brings us into the very core and essence of the Liturgy of the Hours.

### **Prayer of the Church**

Unlike many other prayers, and especially personal prayer, those who say the Divine Office are not praying only on their own behalf, but very clearly they are praying with Jesus, our High Priest. The preface to the Liturgy of the Hours has a succinct statement.

In the Liturgy of the Hours, which the Church from very early times has been accustomed to recite during the course of the day, she fulfils the command of the Lord to pray without ceasing, and while giving praise of God the Father, at the same time she intercedes for the salvation of the world.<sup>1</sup>

The Second Vatican Council had stated that the Liturgy of the Hours is a sharing in priestly prayer of praise and intercession of Jesus Christ:

Jesus Christ, High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the realms of heaven. He attaches to himself the entire community of mankind and has them join him in singing his divine song of praise, for he continues his priestly work through his Church. The Church, by celebrating the Eucharist and by other means, especially the celebration of the divine office, is ceaselessly engaged in praising the Lord and interceding for the salvation of the entire world.<sup>2</sup>

The Council notes too that each day and each part of the day is made holy:

The divine office, in keeping with ancient Christian tradition, is so devised that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praise of God.<sup>3</sup>

There are then three major insights about this prayer from Vatican II and the “General Instruction” that introduces the revised text of the Liturgy of the Hours; they teach us its meaning and how to engage in that prayer. These are:

- i. The liturgy is prayed with Jesus Christ, sharing in his priesthood.
- ii. It is praise of God on behalf of the Church and the world.
- iii. It is intercession again on behalf of the Church and the world.

We take up these points in turn.

#### **i) Prayer along with Jesus our High Priest**

The “General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours” is a long document which introduces the book of the Liturgy of the Hours, gives its meaning and determines how it is to be said.<sup>4</sup> We are immediately alerted to the fact that it is not just any compilation of prayers or sacred texts, but one of the official liturgical books, as it is the Prayer of the Church, and so we need the authority of the Church to help us pray and appreciate it. The General Instruction puts it

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<sup>1</sup> Decree of the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, 11 April 1971

<sup>2</sup> Vatican II, Constitution on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, SC 83

<sup>3</sup> SC 84; see also 88.

<sup>4</sup> “General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours” nn. 6 and 7. The full text is found as preface to full Liturgy of the Hours, and on several internet sites, e.g. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

all in perspective by stating at the beginning that the Prayer of the Church continues the prayer of Christ.

Since we are entirely dependent on God, we must acknowledge and express this sovereignty of the Creator, as the devout people of every age have done by means of prayer. Prayer directed to God must be linked with Christ, the Lord of all, the one Mediator through whom alone we have access to God. He unites to himself the whole human community in such a way that there is an intimate bond between the prayer of Christ and the prayer of all humanity. In Christ, and in Christ alone, human worship of God receives its redemptive value and attains its goal. There is a special and very close bond between Christ and those whom he makes members of his Body, the Church, through the sacrament of rebirth. Thus, from the Head all the riches belonging to the Son flow throughout the whole Body: the communication of the Spirit, the truth, the life, and the participation in the divine Sonship that Christ manifested in all his prayer when he dwelt among us.

Christ's priesthood is also shared by the whole Body of the Church, so that the baptized are consecrated as a spiritual temple and holy priesthood through the rebirth of baptism and the anointing by the Holy Spirit and are empowered to offer the worship of the New Covenant, a worship that derives not from our own powers but from Christ's merit and gift.

Thus the Liturgy of the Hours is not a private prayer, but the public prayer of the Church. We are able to say it because of our sharing through baptism in the priesthood of Christ. This gives an inestimable value to our prayer. In hearing the Son, the Father hears us. Moreover, such prayer is possible only with the help and support of the Holy Spirit. The General Instruction is clear on this point:

The excellence of Christian prayer lies in its sharing in the reverent love of the only-begotten Son for the Father and in the prayer that the Son put into words in his earthly life and that still continues without ceasing in the name of the whole human race and for its salvation, throughout the universal Church and in all its members. The unity of the Church at prayer is brought about by the Holy Spirit, who is the same in Christ, in the whole Church, and in every baptized person. It is this Spirit who "helps us in our weakness" and "intercedes for us with longings too deep for words" (Romans 8:26). As the Spirit of the Son, he gives us "the spirit of adopted children, by which we cry out: Abba, Father" (Romans 8:15; see Galatians 4:6; 1Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 5:18; Jude 20). There can be therefore no Christian prayer without the action of the Holy Spirit, who unites the whole Church and leads it through the Son to the Father.

Just as the "Holy, holy" at Mass should remind us that we are joined to all of heaven, so too as we take up our Office book or prayer sheet, we recall that we are joining with the whole family of God, namely the Communion of Saints. The layman, Frank Duff, founder of the Legion of Mary, used to say the whole Divine Office in Latin. At each "Glory be to the Father" he traced an 'M' on the page to remind him that he was praying with and through the Blessed Virgin Mary.

## ii) Praise of God on behalf of the Church and the world

The highest form of prayer is praise. It is a prayer totally looking on God, without any selfish motivation. It is a prayer that demands generosity and some purity of heart. In turn the prayer of praise lifts us up beyond any self-focus. When we recall that we are to praise God for eternity, there must be an element in the prayer that answers deep needs of our humanity. As the late Fr Martin Tierney observed, “If we are to praise God for all eternity, then we had better get into practice.”

The *General Instruction* has important observations:

In the liturgy of the hours the Church exercises the priestly office of its Head and offers to God “without ceasing” a sacrifice of praise, that is, a tribute of lips acknowledging his name... When the Church offers praise to God in the liturgy of the hours, it unites itself with that hymn of praise sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven; it also receives a foretaste of the song of praise in heaven, described by John in the Book of Revelation, the song sung continually before the throne of God and of the Lamb. Our close union with the Church in heaven is given effective voice when we all, from every tribe and tongue and people and nation redeemed by Christ’s blood (see Revelations 5:9) and gathered together into the one Church, glorify the triune God with one hymn of praise.<sup>5</sup>

An important element in this praise is the fact that we praise God for those who cannot or do not wish to worship God. It is part of our priestly office to stand before God on behalf of others, at times pleading for them, at times doing for them what they cannot or will not do themselves.

## iii) Intercession, again on behalf of the Church and the world.

The third characteristic of our priestly worship is that it is intercession for, and on behalf of, others. There are so many needs in the world: natural disasters; warfare and violence; crime and hatred; sickness and poverty... The list is endless. What can we do? There is little that we might seem to be able to contribute to a war situation in Africa. But we can enter into spiritual warfare against the forces of evil in our world; we can make a serious contribution to the welfare of the world and its needs because we are praying with Jesus Christ and with the company of the saints and angels. Our celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours shows God that we care and that we are committing ourselves to the cause of his Son. Of course, of all the needs for which we intercede, the most important is salvation of others. Again the *General Instruction* is clearly pointed:

But besides the praise of God, the Church in the liturgy of the hours expresses the prayers and desires of all the faithful; indeed, it prays to Christ, and through him to the Father, for the salvation of the whole world. The Church’s voice is not just its own; it is also Christ’s voice, since these prayers are offered in Christ’s name, that is, “through our Lord Jesus Christ,” and so the Church continues to offer the prayer and petition that Christ poured out in the days of his earthly life and that have therefore a unique effectiveness. The ecclesial community thus exercises a truly maternal function in bringing souls to Christ, not only by charity, good example, and works of penance but also by prayer.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> General Instruction, nn. 15 and 16.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 17.

Praying for sinners is not so common today as in my youth. But it is a mistake to ignore such prayer. We have only to look at Marian apparitions: nearly all of them ask for prayer for the conversion of sinners.

### Elements of the Divine Office

The basic components of the Office are hymns, psalms, scripture readings and prayer formulae. There are some features common to all the hours.

- **Opening invocation:** “O God, come to our aid; O Lord, make haste to help us. Glory be to the Father...”
- **Hymn** to set the tone for the celebration. In a group, it may be sung, or another familiar one substituted.
- **Psalms.** Each psalm has an introduction and conclusion, which direct our thoughts to the psalm, the season or celebration. This is called the **Antiphon** [It can vary in a season like Lent]. The psalm ends with the ‘Glory be to the Father’ and its antiphon.
- **Scripture reading.** This is one short passage that is read without introduction. There should be a short pause (20-30 seconds) to let the text speak to us.
- There is a **response.** We are familiar with “Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God” with “That we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.” The responses in the Office include the first part of the ‘Glory be to the Father’ and a repetition.
- Then we have one of the great New Testament **Canticles** [They would be called Psalms if they were in the Old Testament!]. In Morning Prayer we have the hymn/canticle of Zechariah, ‘The Benedictus’, in Evening Prayer we have the hymn of Mary, ‘The Magnificat’; in Night Prayer we have the hymn or canticle of Simeon, ‘The Nunc dimittis’. Each of these will have its own antiphon said at the beginning and the end.
- At Morning Prayer and at Evening Prayer there are **Intercessions** as at Mass. Then the **Our Father** and the **Blessing**.

In the Office we are always free to substitute for a psalm or prayer or antiphon. Hence if you cannot find the “correct one,” pick another. There is no examination or marks for saying the Office; we just do our best and the Lord understands.

- Lauds (Morning Prayer)** is intended to focus on the theme of resurrection. We remember the Light of the World as we see the first light of day and prepare for our day’s work. (*General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*: 38) It consists of a **hymn** (optional), **two psalms**, an **Old Testament canticle** (a poetic section like a psalm from another book of the Bible), a **short reading**, and the **Canticle of Zechariah** (Luke 1:68-79) which prophesies the coming of the Messiah. The morning hour ends with intercessions, the ‘Our Father’, a general concluding prayer and blessing.
- Vespers (Evening Prayer)** is intended to focus on the theme of thanksgiving and repentance. Looking back on the day, we give thanks for the blessings we enjoyed and ask forgiveness for our shortcomings. (*General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours*: 39) It consists of a **hymn** (optional), **two psalms**, a **canticle from the New Testament**, a **short reading**, and the **Canticle of Mary** (or Magnificat – Luke 1:46-55) in which Mary praises God after the Annunciation. The hour ends with intercessions, the ‘Our Father’, a general concluding prayer and blessing.

- iii) **Compline (Night Prayer)** is designed to be said late at night, just before going to bed. Its theme is praying for protection from all fears and evils, and prayer for the dead. It consists of **one psalm, a short reading and a canticle from the Gospels**, a concluding prayer, blessing and a Marian verse.

The liturgy allows for the incorporation of Morning and Evening Prayer into Mass. In that case we have the following:

- Opening Greetings,
- Psalms of Office,
- Mass continues with readings until after homily,
- Intercessions / Prayer of the Faithful,
- Mass continues with gifts,
- After Communion there is either the *Benedictus* (Morning Prayer) or *Magnificat* (Evening Prayer),
- Mass concludes with Prayer after Communion.

### **Saying the Office: some helps**

We need a central focus. The Divine Office is a special kind of prayer. We will be helped by an awareness of what we are doing.

- We are praying with Jesus Christ, continuing his intercession. We are exercising our baptismal priesthood.
- We are praying in, with and for the Church.
- We are making a difference in the world.
- Through the Office we are stretching out to the vast area of sin in the world: refugees, abortions, violence, greed, wars, destruction...
- We pray for those in need, especially the sick.
- The Intercessions at Evening prayer always end with a remembrance of the departed who in Purgatory may need our prayer.
- We can add specific and current needs to the intercessions.
- We are not alone but with all of heaven.
- We are using prayers inspired by the Holy Spirit to praise God.
- Silence is important. There should be pause after scripture reading, to let God's word sink in, as a challenge or delight.
- We need to grow in love with the psalm texts that will over time form our minds and attitudes, as well as drawing us into God's way of thinking.
- As with the Rosary, we can offer the Office for special intentions.