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What is the purpose of the liturgy of the hours

Many Catholics hear that priests are required to recite the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office, and assume it is a “private” prayer said only by priests and those in religious orders. Although clerics and religious are obligated by Church law to say the Divine Office (see Canons 1173-1175), laymen and women are increasingly making the Liturgy of the Hours part of their spiritual growth and development by reciting morning and evening prayer. Why are these prayers important in the life of the Church? “Seven times a day I praise you” The Divine Office owes its remote origin to the inspiration of God’s Covenant with the Jewish people. He commanded the Aaronic priests (c. 1280 B.C.) to offer a morning and evening sacrifice (see Ex 29:38-39). During the Babylonian Exile (587-521 B.C.), when the Temple did not exist, the synagogue services of Scripture readings, psalms and hymns developed as a substitute for the bloody sacrifices of the Temple, a sacrifice of praise. The inspiration for this development may have been sentiments in Psalms such as King David’s prayer, “Seven times a day I praise you” (Ps 119:164), and the statement that God’s law is studied by those who are righteous “day and night” (Ps 1:2). After the people returned to Judea, and the Temple was rebuilt, the prayer services developed in Babylon for the local assemblies (synagogues) of the people were brought into Temple use as well. We know that in addition to morning and evening prayer to accompany the sacrifices there was prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hours of the day. The Acts of the Apostles notes that Christians continued to pray at these hours (see Acts 2:15; 10:3). And, although the apostles no longer shared in the Temple sacrifices — they had its fulfillment in the “breaking of the bread” (the Eucharist) — they continued to frequent the Temple at the customary hours of prayer (Acts 3:1). Monastic and eremitical (hermit) practice, as it developed in the early Church, recognized in the psalms the perfect form of prayer and did not try to improve upon it. The practices were quite individual from monastery to monastery. At first some tried to do the entire Psalter (150 psalms) each day, but eventually that was abandoned for a weekly cycle built around certain hours of the day. With the reforms of the Second Vatican Council the traditional one-week Psalter cycle became a four-week cycle. Among the earliest Psalter cycles of which we have a record is the division given by St. Benedict in his Rule for Monasteries (chapters 8-19) around 550, with canonical hours of lauds (morning prayer) offered at sunrise, prime (first hour of the day), terce (third hour, or midmorning), sext (sixth hour, or midday), none (ninth hour, or midafternoon), vespers (evening prayer) offered at sunset, and 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 “through the nightwatches” (Ps 63:7) — that is, 9 p.m., midnight and 3 a.m. After the Council of Trent and its reforms, the Roman Breviary became the Office of the entire Latin Church. It should be noted that religious orders have a right to their own version, though many simply use the Roman Office. These versions are typically used by members of monastic and contemplative communities, such as the Trappists and Carmelites. The name Liturgy of the Hours was adopted in 1970 to emphasize that the purpose of prayer was to sanctify the whole day and every activity of daily life in the modern world. Pope Paul VI, in his apostolic constitution *Laudis Canticum* establishing the Liturgy of the Hours, wrote, “Since the Liturgy of the Hours is the means of sanctifying the day, the order of this prayer was revised so that the canonical hours could more easily relate to the chronological hours of the day in the circumstances of modern life.” The Liturgy of the Hours is organized currently in a similar way to the earlier Divine Office, but with a number of significant changes. Lauds (morning prayer) and vespers (evening prayer) are given a clear priority, with the rest of the day structured around them. A midday prayer is suggested — shorter than morning and evening prayer. Communities of contemplatives are still required to observe all three (and others are encouraged to do so), but one may choose to use only one, with the texts that are offered. Compline (night prayer) is retained, with the change that it could now be recited after midnight (previously, it was necessary to complete the entire cycle before midnight). A major addition was the Office of Readings. Praying With One Accord Public and common prayer by God’s holy people is rightly considered to be among the most important duties of the entire Church. We see how from the very beginning those who were baptized “devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, and to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). As one continues reading the Acts of the Apostles, frequent testimony is given to the fact that the entire Christian community prayed “with one accord” (Acts 1:14; 4:24). When the Christian faithful pray the Liturgy of the Hours, they are connected in a very real and unique way to others who are praying this form of liturgical prayer, so that indeed from the rising of the sun to its setting we proclaim the glory and honor of God. Prayer is classically defined as lifting our hearts and minds to God. When the Liturgy of the Hours is celebrated, the people of God are not only united with the Church in prayer, they are praying words blessed by Him that reflect the full spectrum of our human experience and that call for the sanctification and healing of our world. Derek Abrajano writes from Chicago. Liturgy of the Hours: a Catholic, ancient form of prayer that used to intimidate the heck out of me. I walked into our campus’ chapel once to find our priests and FOCUS missionaries praying morning prayer, one of the parts of Liturgy of the Hours. I optimistically tried to follow along, until I soon discovered that there was simply too much page flipping, too much standing up and sitting down, and too many confusing say-this-thing-but-not-that-thing-but-sometimes-this-thing parts. I made sure to avoid that specific time slot in the chapel in the future. Until I realized that LITURGY OF THE HOURS IS AWESOME!! But first, what even is it? I had no clue. THE Daily Prayer of the Church Liturgy of the Hours goes by many names: Divine Office, Breviary, Flippy Book (I may be the only one who uses this last one, though). As the USCCB states, it is “the daily prayer of the Church, marking the hours of each day and sanctifying the day with prayer.” The five “hours” during which you offer praise to God in this prayer are (1) Office of Readings, (2) Morning Prayer or “Lauds,” (3) Daytime Prayer (divided into specific parts of the daytime), (4) Evening Prayer or “Vespers,” and (5) Night Prayer or “Compline.” The Divine Office traces its roots back to the early Church (more info.) Although the practice of marking the day with prayer has been engrained in our faith throughout all of salvation history. The prayers usually come in a Breviary, a thick book with many ribbons that mark specific hours or seasons in the Liturgical Year. They focus heavily on the Psalms, but include parts from all over the Bible and particularly the Gospel. In reflecting on these verses, we have the opportunity to hear the Spirit’s voice, to realize that God crafted these words knowing that we, specifically, would read them. And, fun fact: like the Mass readings, the readings we reflect on change each day and week. Any Catholic reading the Divine Office that day is reflecting on the same unique piece of God’s inspired Word. Even the title “the daily prayer of the Church” points to its significance. I would think the Rosary or the Mass would earn that title (though the Mass is the source and summit of our faith, so I think it wins in the end). But no it’s the Breviary! But anyways, fun fact #2, priests don’t actually have to celebrate Mass every day. But they DO have to pray the hours of the Divine Office. Every single day. Ask your nearest priest, he can prove it! All this to say, Liturgy of the Hours rocks. It’s such a beautiful aspect of our faith. For centuries, priests and religious have poured their intercession into our Church family through this form of prayer. For lay people today, and especially us as young Catholics, it can serve as a powerful reminder of the Lord who constantly surrounds our daily life. The Fruits of Divine Office Unity. I think this one of the greatest things to be earned from incorporating Divine Office into our daily routines. I’m writing this from a coffee shop in Nicaragua, where I will be spending the next two months of my summer. New foods, new languages, and new experiences make me nervous about staying connected to my Church community. The Eucharist and the Divine Office keep me sane and ease these fears. I can reflect on the prayers each day and know that my Catholic brothers and sisters are reading these same words. My chaplains back home, my parish priest, the awesome Dominican Sisters in Nashville (who sing the words of Divine Office), and the priest down the street at the local Church here are all praying with me. And even my friends and family members who also use this form of prayer. Friends, strangers, all of us are reflecting on this same devotional. Where to Start: So you want to give this whole shindig a try? First of all, know that you don’t have to pray the Divine Office if it’s not for you (unless you’re a priest, sorry). And if you decide you do like it, you don’t have to do all the prayers (unless you’re a priest, sorry again). And you don’t have to the hours at that actual time, although it’s preferred. The Flippy Book is confusing, so I’d recommend praying with your priest or a well-versed friend at first. They can help you set the ribbons and explain what you need to know to get off the ground. A far less intimidating way to start is with an app version. I personally love iBreviary, but there are many awesome alternatives. They present the prayers for that specific day, as the format can change based on the season, whether or not it’s a feast day, etc. Furthermore, Compline (night prayer) is probably the most accessible and the best place to start. Unlike the other hours, it repeats on a weekly cycle (the others rotate on a 4 week cycle). This means that every Monday, Tuesday, etc. you pray the same prayer specific to that day. It’s much simpler and includes less flipping. Then from there you can learn more about the other hours, especially morning and evening prayers, which are both particularly common. Lastly, don’t be afraid to mess up. I may get completely off and start doing the wrong prayers for this whole 2 months, but hey, prayer is prayer. Already I’ve seen the Lord speak life through His words in these prayers. And, perhaps more significantly, I’ve found myself better able to think of Him. It’s so easy in our busy world to put Him off, to reserve Him only for that one hour on Sundays. But by marking each day—and even each part of our day—as a blessing from Him, His presence becomes second nature. So, if you ever are to mory on into a morning prayer party, be not afraid!! You can do this! Join the ranks of awesome nuns and priests and monks and lay people and conquer the Flippy Book. I believe in you. And know that I’ll offer my Liturgy of the Hours prayers for you. I was intrigued by the Liturgy of the Hours before I even became Catholic. I read of other mamas praying the hours and working the hard stops of these prayers into their daily life. And of it bearing fruit in their lives. Like many other things in the Church, though, there was a general assumption that Catholics just knew how to do this. Jargon was thrown about, and despite my attempts to research what the Hours were and how to do it, the whole idea just left me scratching my head. Then about a year ago I stumbled on the book *The Everyday Catholic’s Guide to the Liturgy of the Hours* and all of a sudden things were very clear. Daria Sockey does a fabulous job of explaining exactly what the Hours are and how to pray them. The book also contains tons of options for praying the hours — different books, websites, apps, and audio versions. Which is helpful, but what if you just want a crash course because you want to pray today? Well that I provide right here! Here is Pam’s super-duper easy crash course of how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in Three Easy Steps for those who just want to get started today. 1. What is the Liturgy of the Hours? Very simply the Hours are a set of prayers the church has been praying for thousands of years. At set times of day, religious, priests and even laypeople stop what they are doing and gather to pray these prayers. The prayers themselves are an arrangement of Psalms and other Scripture. Some of the elements of the prayers repeat daily and others repeat less often, but if you pray them long enough you will notice things start to sound familiar. There are seven different prayers spread throughout the day, but don’t worry, you are going to start with just one. 2. Pick ONE hour to start with. “Pam, what do you mean I have to stop seven times a day to pray?” Talk about overwhelming! Seven Hours a day are for religious communities whose vocation is to pray. And Hours is the name of the prayer. The actual prayers take about 10-20 minutes to pray. While it would be lovely to pray the Psalms that many times a day, it really isn’t practical for most people — especially moms. We have a dear semi-retired priest at our parish who tells us that the greatest form of prayer is to realize we are in God’s presence. So focus on that throughout the day, and just choose one of the Hours to sit and pray to get you started. I love the Psalms of the Morning Hour — so full of praise and rejoicing. This prayer is to be said upon waking. Another option is Evening Prayer. Usually said in the later afternoon to early evening this prayer includes the beautiful Magnificat. If you typically have a few minutes at the end of your day, or would like to begin praying with your family, this may be a good option to choose. Night Prayer comes right before bed. These Psalms focus on God’s protection during the night. There are others during the day, but these are the three main ones. I personally love Morning Prayer, but choose which one works for you. Start with one and build from there. 3. Visit Divine Office.org At this website you can see the proper prayers for today. You can print the prayers, pray from your computer screen, or click the audio button to pray “in community” with the recording. It is the easiest way to begin to pray the Divine Office without the confusion of what to pray and when. Just choose the day and prayer and get started. When You are Ready for More I really do recommend the book. *The Everyday Catholic’s Guide to the Liturgy of the Hours* lays things out in an easy, understandable manner and provides many different options for praying the Hours — from various book forms to the myriad of apps available. As for me, I love the apps of Divine Office. The audio is beautifully done; I feel as if I am praying in community; the content is always there; and the app format makes praying the hours easy to do. This app makes it easy to pray if you are away from your computer or not connected to the Internet. There is something about praying the Psalms and Scripture that lifts you above ordinary prayer. Jesus and Mary prayed the Psalms — they knew them by heart. It’s a beautiful way to start or end your day knowing that the entire Church is praying with you and giving honor to God. So start with one, and above all, ask for His guidance and blessing in your endeavor. What is your experience with the Liturgy of the Hours? I would love to hear about it in the comments.

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