



THEOLOGY CORNER

Vol. 134 – August 1st, 2021

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“What is the Liturgy of the Hours?”

This is a fascinating topic because the Liturgy of the Hours is a practice to which the vast majority of Catholics have never been exposed. While this prayer of the Church was not always called the Liturgy of the Hours, it was renamed in order to express the fact that it is meant to sanctify the day, or as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy says, “so that the whole course of the day and night is made holy by the praises of God.” (SC, 84). The traditional name for the Liturgy of the Hours is the “Divine Office” because it fulfills a duty of the Church (Latin: *officium* = duty) to “pray without ceasing” as St. Paul tells the Thessalonians (1 Thess 5:16). Praying at various times throughout the day is not a novel invention by the Church. The Jews, as part of the Mosaic law, prayed at least three times a day: morning, evening, and night. We see elsewhere in the scriptures that some prayed seven times a day (“Seven times a day, I praise you.” - Psalm 119:164). The early Christians continued this practice as we see written in Acts that Peter, John, and Cornelius prayed at the “sixth” and “ninth” hours (Acts 3:1, 10:9, 10:30).

To express the importance of the Liturgy of the Hours, it is essential to determine the difference in character between liturgical prayer and private devotional prayer. Put simply, liturgical prayer is the official public prayer of the Church whereby the Body of Christ, united with its Head, praises and worships the Father under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is this character that the Church describes when she says that the liturgy is the “summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.”

The primary manner in which we engage in liturgical prayer is through the Mass. But the Liturgy of the Hours is an extension of the Mass, so much so that many people often refer to the Mass as “Part One” of the liturgy and the Liturgy of the Hours as “Part Two.” Devotional prayers, on the other hand, are external to the liturgy — done for the sake of the enrichment of our relationship with God and ultimately leading us *to* the liturgy. Examples of private devotions would be the Rosary, Divine Mercy Chaplet, Novenas, etc. It is for this reason that the Church considers these as secondary. This is why it is obligatory, according to canon law (Canon 276 §2.3), that all priests and deacons carry out the Liturgy of the Hours daily, whereas the other devotions are optional. This is not as though to say, that private devotions are not important or even vital to the spiritual life, but is simply to denote the character of prayer on behalf of the **whole body** and the prayer on behalf of the **individual**.

Now, it seems that many of those who are somewhat familiar with the Liturgy of the Hours, believe that it is a practice specific to members of the clergy. This is not true at all! In fact, there have been various modifications made to the format of the Divine Office, most notably in 1971, in order to make it more “user friendly” for the laity. Over the past few decades, John Paul II and Benedict XVI have been very vocal about their desire for all of the laity to participate in this great prayer of the Church. The big question here is *why* do people choose to avoid praying the Liturgy of the Hours? I think the main reason is because its use is so foreign that it seems like a daunting task to learn a whole new way of praying throughout the day. I have three solutions to propose:

- 1) *Start small.* You do not have to take on every one of the “hours.” Side note: They do not actually take an hour to pray — it usually takes less time than praying a rosary! They are called hours because they sanctify the hours of the day whether they be the morning, afternoon, evening, or night hours. Many people start off praying only what are called the “hinge hours” (i.e., morning and evening prayer), and eventually adding in night prayer is a piece of cake!
- 2) *Don't get overwhelmed by the multi-volume set.* There are many other options for beginners who are overwhelmed by the idea of learning how to navigate the four volumes. You can purchase the shorter one volume “Christian Prayer” or the even shorter “Shorter Christian Prayer.” If you use a smartphone, you can download apps that streamline it all for you such as: iBreviary, Universalis, or Laudate (which is the Swiss-army knife of Catholic Prayer apps).
- 3) *Familiarize yourself with the purpose and general structure of the Liturgy of the Hours* by: continuing to read this article, reading the pertinent documents on the Liturgy of the Hours: Chapter 4 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours, or a really great book called, “The Everyday Catholic’s Guide to the Liturgy of the Hours” by Daria Sockey (this book is great for those who do not care for all the theological jargon).

But in the meantime, here is the main structure of the Liturgy of the Hours:

Office of the Readings (Matins) - This is a “floating hour” and can be prayed at anytime of the day.

Morning Prayer (Lauds) - This is traditionally prayed at 6am, but can be prayed whenever you wake up.

Daytime Prayer (Terce/Sext/None) - These “little hours” are traditionally prayed at 9am/12pm/3pm.

Evening Prayer (Vespers) - Prayed traditionally at 6pm, this prayer along with morning prayer are considered “hinge hours” because they are the most important hours to pray. As you begin to develop the habit of praying the Divine Office, start with these!

Night Prayer (Compline) - Traditionally prayed at 9pm, this prayer can be done before you go to sleep.

NB. - This structure was created by St. Benedict in the 6th century. The only major difference now is that there used to be an hour called “Prime” which was prayed at 3am, but this was removed from general practice at the Second Vatican Council.

If you are considering taking on this great tradition, just do it. It will change you. As human beings living in such a busy world and inundated with work, social media, and the like, we get so consumed with the things of the world without maintaining a proper order of our thoughts and actions toward God. This serves to mitigate some of the harmful effects of these things. There is a reason that almost every religion adopts this practice of praying throughout the day! Most people are aware of the Muslim *Salat*, but less people are aware of the Divine Office! Let us change that. Let us bring God back into our daily lives so that we can rebuild our Catholic culture. The choice is yours.

I will end with a beautiful quote from the popular Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister:

“We go to prayer to be transfigured ourselves, to come to see the world as God sees the world, to practice the presence of God, to put on a heart of justice, of love, and of compassion for others. Praying daily with the word of God, either in daily scripture or through the Liturgy of the Hours, helps us, little by little, to see the world, our neighbors, and even ourselves as God sees us.”