

The Liturgy of the Hours

Introduction

The Lord Jesus, by word and example, taught his disciples that prayer is normative for the Christian believer. His life was spent in prayer: reflection alone in the desert, morning and evening prayer in the synagogue, praying with his disciples. Jesus was a 'man of prayer' in every sense of the word, for communication with his heavenly Father was indicative of his whole life's work and mission. *Even now, the risen Lord forever lives to make intercession for us* (see Hebrews 7:25). He is the supreme and eternal Priest and our prayer is meant to be a participation in his *heavenly* liturgy. Prayer is the language of the city of God. Our motivation in prayer is to be joined to the Lord, to make his prayer ours, in the hope that ours will be his.

Christian prayer, like the prayer of Jesus, is living in the presence of God in an intimate communion of praise and thanksgiving of reflection and supplication. The mighty works of God in the history of his people and in the personal history of the believer are the ground of all prayer. *It is the creative and loving kindness of God in our individual lives and in the Christian communities which enables us to sing out his praises and makes us confident enough to place before him our most pressing needs, our most urgent desires, and our most anxious pleas.*

Thus, whether it is the meditative prayer of the Christian alone in a room or the surging hymns and petitions of the liturgical assembly, Christian prayer finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ because it is in the name of the Lord Jesus that we pray, and in his name that our assemblies are formed.

The "necessity of praying always and never losing heart" (Luke 18:1) is the basis of the Christian's obligation to pray. From the earliest times the Church has interpreted Christ's norm in two directions: personal prayer and liturgical prayer. The Lord's Prayer provided the model for personal Christian prayer. It is praise and petition, confidence and thanksgiving all in one movement offered to the Father.

Liturgical prayer, when the ecclesial assembly gathers together, also models itself on the life and example of Jesus. Jesus was ever attentive to the festivals of Israel. Attendance at Temple and synagogue expressed his own piety. His very act of redemption is given to us to celebrate in the context of the most basic of Jewish liturgical rites: the home seder. In the same way, the liturgy of the hours or Divine Office from the days of the early Church to our own, is modeled on the hinges of synagogue Sabbath worship, Morning and Evening Prayer. The Office is an expression of "the necessity of praying always," day after day, hour by hour.

The Second Vatican Council decreed a thorough reform of the liturgy of the hours so that it would truly express the sanctification of time and the consecration of the Christian's life in a rhythm not unlike that of the life of the Lord himself. By its nature, the Office is a priestly work of the whole Christian people and mirrors the eternal praise offered by the heavenly court. It is the rich source of personal prayer also, for the liturgy of the hours familiarizes us with the psalms and Scriptures. It teaches us confidently to offer our petitions to the Lord day after day. In morning and evening we pray the Lord's Prayer and the gospel canticles proclaiming God's marvelous deeds. The Office nourishes us through song and prayer for the Sunday eucharistic assembly. Indeed, it is the prolongation of the central eucharistic theme of praise and thanksgiving. Ultimately, through the celebration of the hours we are placed in more intimate contact with the mystery of Christ made present in the liturgical year.

In many ways then the liturgy of the hours is a school of prayer for all Christians. There we learn to pray. Through the Office the community, that is the Church, is manifested. Thus the obligation to pray the hours is serious for the whole Church, particularly those in orders who lead the assembly to celebrate this liturgy daily, and who have, in a special way, given themselves to public ministry within the Church.

The Liturgy Revised

The work of revising the traditional Roman Office took several years. The basic Latin text, prepared by the Apostolic See at the mandate of the Second Vatican Council, was published in 1971 and 1972 under the title *Liturgia Horarum*. In turn, this text was faithfully rendered into contemporary English by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, sponsored by some eleven bishops' conferences and serving the Church in their countries and many other countries of the world. This translation, which was published in 1974 and 1975, is the only version approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for the Church in the United States. It appears in editions issued by several publishers.

The *Liturgy of the Hours*, whether in its complete form (4 volumes) or in 1 volume (*Christian Prayer*), has a number of distinctive features which show the goals sought by the Second Vatican Council: a simplified and somewhat abbreviated structure; a vastly enlarged range of biblical and non-biblical readings, the latter not only from the Fathers and traditional writers, but also from modern sources; psalm prayers to give a Christian reflection upon the Old Testament songs of praise; canticles from Scripture not used in the previous Office; new intercessory prayers in litany form; *wide flexibility and adaptability* in the use of texts. Even apart from the official approbation of Church authority, the Roman *Liturgy of the Hours* is a vastly improved collection of prayer services for the hours of each day of the Christian year.

The Liturgy of the Hours is preceded, as was the restored Order of Mass in 1969, by an important General Instruction. This lengthy document goes far beyond the introductory material of the old *Breviarium Romanum*. It gives not only necessary directions but also a

Careful description of all the elements which make up the liturgy of the hours and, still more important, the basic rationale for common services of prayer in the Christian community. The riches of the liturgical Office, the relation and *flexibility* of the parts, and the like are all explained in the General Instruction.

The Prayer of the Church

Perhaps the most difficult and challenging task is to make the liturgy of the hours in fact and practice, as well as in theory and doctrine, the prayer of the entire Church. It is several decades since the celebration of Sunday Prayer or Vespers practically disappeared from parishes in this country. The best efforts of the liturgical movement in the 1940s and 1950s to restore Sunday Vespers or Compline to parish use had only minimal success. The singing of Sunday Vespers was largely limited to seminaries; the singing of anything like the whole Office was largely limited to religious communities.

To introduce, in 1977, the common celebration of even some part of the Church's liturgical prayer in parishes and similar communities and gatherings will require extraordinary efforts, which are beyond the immediate purpose or scope of this statement to suggest. Such a development will be aided considerably, however, by the providential growth of groups, houses, and associations for prayer; by the practice among priests and others of voluntarily gathering to pray some part of the liturgy of the hours; by making it part of the prayer of meetings of priests' senates, diocesan and parish councils and of the prayer life of seminaries, rectories, and religious communities; and by greater familiarity with styles of common prayer similar to the official liturgy. Above all, it will be helpful if those accustomed to pray the Office alone, especially priests and deacons, gather others from their parishes to join with them in common prayer.

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Resource: *The School of Prayer: An Introduction to The Divine Office for all Christians.* By John Brooks. Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1992. Pp. 441. This small book is an excellent resource for understanding and teaching the structure of the Office. It also has commentary of the Hymns and Psalms of Morning, Evening and Night prayer. Available through Amazon.com.