Divine Office

“Seven times a day I praise thee
   for thy righteous ordinances.
Great peace have those who love thy law;
   nothing can make them stumble.
I hope for thy salvation, O Lord,
   and I do thy commandments.
My soul keeps thy testimonies;
   I love them exceedingly.
I keep thy precepts and testimonies,
   for all my ways are before thee.
Let my cry come before thee, O Lord;
   give me understanding according to thy word!” – Psalm
119:164-169

Introduction

The Liturgy of the Hours or Divine Office is the official set of daily prayers prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church to be recited at the canonical hours by the clergy, religious orders, and laity. It consists primarily of psalms supplemented by hymns and readings. Together with the Mass, it constitutes the official public prayer life of the Church. Only the Sacrament of the Eucharist is superior to the Divine Office.

Upon ordination to any of the Holy Orders, the daily recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours becomes a vowed canonical obligation. However, ordination is not required to pray the Divine Office, either privately or publicly.

The Roman Breviary was originally the Office of the canons of St. Peter’s and the other Roman Basilicas. After the Council of Trent and its reforms, the Roman Breviary became the Office of the entire Latin Church.

Vatican II produced major revisions of the Breviary, including renaming it the Liturgy of the Hours, and translating it carefully into the vernacular language.

The book(s):

The necessary text for the Liturgy of the Hours is available from Catholic Book Publishing, New York, in three forms:

1. The Liturgy of the Hours, four volume set
2. Christian Prayer, a single volume, contains the full year of Morning and Evening offices, but has a reduced set of the Office of Readings.
3. Shorter Christian Prayer, a single volume containing only Morning and Evening Offices and selected texts for the Seasons and Major Feasts of the year.
Note that large print editions of each can be ordered. Like the Lectionary, the books are not specific for a particular calendar year, and thus are used for many years of prayer.

Catholic Book Publishing annually publishes the Saint Joseph Guide for the Liturgy of the Hours. This small book is available for each form, and tells one what pages of the matching Liturgy of the Hours contain the appropriate texts for each date of that year.

Perhaps the most confusing elements in the Liturgy of the Hours are the different calendars that determine the content of each day’s liturgy. The Breviary is written in terms of the days of the liturgical year, which may fall on different calendar dates in different calendar years. However, the celebrations of saints usually occur on a specific date in the calendar. There are rules that resolve conflicts that occur between liturgical and calendar dates.

The sections of the Breviary are:

1. Temporal
2. Ordinary
3. Sanctoral Calendar
4. Commons

The Temporal, also known as the Proper of Seasons, establishes annual events such as the Easter Tridium, Christmas, Epiphany, Ascension and Pentecost, Sundays of Advent, Lent and the season of Easter in the liturgical calendar (e.g., “Thursday of the Eighteenth Week in ordinary time”).

The Ordinary is the “Order” of each day’s liturgy. It is placed in the center of the Breviary because it must be used along with both Propers and Commons.

The Sanctoral, or Proper of Saints, sets dates of the calendar year of the Solemnities of the Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary, All Saints Day and feast days of specific saints. Often this involves an alternate reading at the Office of Readings, and/or an alternative Psalmody taken from the appropriate Common. Some of these celebrations are obligatory and some are optional; in the latter case, the Proper of Seasons provides an alternative text.

The Commons are alternative psalmody used with specific saints. The Proper of Saints for a saint who is a Virgin, a Martyr, a Doctor of the Church, a Pastor or a Bishop usually directs the celebrant to the appropriate Common.

See why the Saint Joseph Guide is helpful?
The Various Hours and their Names

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hour of the Day</th>
<th>Latin Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During the Night</td>
<td>Matins</td>
<td>Readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunrise</td>
<td>Lauds</td>
<td>Morning Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Hour of the Day</td>
<td>Prime</td>
<td>(suppressed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Hour of the Day</td>
<td>Terce</td>
<td>Mid-morning Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sixth Hour of the Day</td>
<td>Sext</td>
<td>Midday Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ninth Hour of the Day</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Mid-afternoon Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As evening approaches</td>
<td>Vespers</td>
<td>Evening Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nightfall</td>
<td>Compline</td>
<td>Night Prayer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current usage focuses on three major hours and from two to four minor hours:

- The *Officium lectionis* or Office of Readings (formerly Matins), major hour
- *Lauds* or Morning prayer, major hour
- Daytime prayer, which can be one or all of:
  - *Terce* or Mid-Morning Prayer
  - *Sext* or Midday Prayer
  - *None* or Mid-Afternoon Prayer
- *Vespers* or Evening Prayer, major hour
- *Compline* or Night Prayer

The Liturgy of the Hours is often sung or chanted, but can also be recited. Traditionally, it is prayed aloud, and solitary recitation is more effective if one moves one’s lips. Note that in Saint Augustine’s time, silent reading was regarded as an unusual skill. Group recitation is referred to as “choral” recitation, even if no singing or chant is involved.

The Psalmody

The Psalms are the master collection of prayers in the Old Testament. It is traditional that David was their author, but he did not write all of them. Based on analysis of Hebrew texts, the psalms were written over a period of approximately 400 years. Originally arising from the Temple Priesthood, part of whose role was to find a response for every request by those who brought sacrifices to the Temple, the Psalms evolved into devotions that were suitable for smaller worship groups during the Babylonian captivity. The Psalms express a centuries-long conversation between God and His Chosen People.

The Psalms are an important foundation of Christianity. The New Testament contains more references to the Psalms than to any other book of the Hebrew testament, with the sole exception of Isaiah. Catholic theologians regard the Psalms as the prayers of Christ, enshrined in the Hebrew Testament long before the Incarnation.
Monastic and eremitical (hermit) practice in the early Church recognized in the Psalms the perfect form of prayer and did not try to improve upon it. Some monasteries tried to pray all 150 psalms every day, but this was replaced by a weekly cycle. After Vatican II this became the four-week cycle we use now.

The Psalms are truly poetry and were made to be sung. They use poetic devices such as rhythm and repetition to enrich their statements, letting the hearer perceive the poem’s object from more than one perspective. Although rhymed poetry does not translate well into other languages, the structure that connects the lines of a Hebrew Psalm is not rhyme, but repetition – which, of course, translates easily into any tongue.

The Gifts of the Hours

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” – Isaiah 55:10-11

When we say or sing the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office), we participate as the Body of Christ in the work of Divine Praise that flows unceasingly from the Son to the Father. The breath of our human speech is a symbolic sacrifice of ourselves, a gift of the principle of life that animates the human spirit and body. This Sacrifice of Praise returns to the Father the breath with which He brought Adam to life. It is a prolongation of, and setting for, the Sacrifice of the Eucharist, which we, with Christ, re-present to the Father in the Mass.

The Office is the consecration of time, the antechamber to eternity and the first creation of God. The three cycles of time in the Office bring us back to the fountainhead of all created life.

The first cycle of the Office is the sanctifying cycle of the hours of the day, beginning at the rising of the sun and completing with its setting. It recalls the first act of God in creation, the division of the light from the darkness. At Lauds we praise the coming of the light; at Terce, Sext and Nones we pause in our daily labors to rededicate our work to the advancement of God’s Kingdom, at Vespers we sing our gratitude to the Father for safe completion of our day, and the daily bread with which He has graced us. Whenever we say Matins, we open our hearts and minds to receive the Word. At Compline we examine our consciences for the sins we have committed in the course of the day, beg God’s forgiveness, and ask His protection while we sleep, as well as for the grace of a peaceful death.

The second cycle of the Office is the sanctifying cycle of the week, the seven-day cycle that begins with Sunday, the day of Christ’s Resurrection, and recapitulates the seven-day cycle of creation. Each week of the four-week psalter begins with Evening Prayer I, the special vigil prayer that begins the Sabbath observance. The monastic ideal of praise and
prayer compressed all of the psalter into a single week; our present practice of the Office adds the canticles to the psalter, and extends the complete psalter to four weeks.

**The third cycle of the Office** is the sanctifying cycle of the liturgical year and seasons. It begins with Advent, rises to the central event of Easter, and then rounds out the year of prayer. The Temporal Calendar of the Office ties together the revelation of God in salvation history as made manifest by the scriptural events of the life, death and glorification of Jesus. To this are added, like ornaments on a bride, the Sanctoral Calendar of feasts of Mary and the saints that give us examples of the imitation of Christ. By binding each of these feasts to the appropriate Common, the role of the holy person in the economy of Christ’s Body is clarified and illuminated.

The Divine Office, including the Office of Readings, complements the three-year cycle of the daily Mass. Faithfully practicing both liturgies entails reading and contemplation of nearly the entire Bible, as well as many important writings of the Fathers and Saints.

The Psalms are the ancient praises of God by the Church, “cries of wonder, exultation, anguish or joy,” (as Thomas Merton wrote) that express our amazed realization that God the Almighty has given us everything in our lives. God does not need to be told this – but we do. We are made to be instruments of prayer, and the Psalms accomplish the tuning of these instruments to our parts in the symphony of all Creation.

We never pray the Office alone. Somewhere in the world, at any moment of the day, another Christian is praying with us. But the Office is meant to be a communal activity as well, merging our voices with those of our brothers and sisters in an order that reflects the orderly universe that God has made, in which our relationship to each other and to God are expressed with the very breath of our lives.