

Overview of the Liturgy of the Hours

As Christians we are the spiritual daughters and sons of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. With the Jewish people, we share a common faith in the one God, and we share common Scriptures in the Old Testament. This sharing is part of our inheritance from the people of Israel. Likewise, we have inherited a pattern of worship that serves as the roots for the Liturgy of the Hours.

Central to the prayer life of Jews during Jesus' time was the recitation of the Shema (see Deuteronomy 6:4–5), both in the morning and in the evening. The recitation of the Shema was not a mere recollection of these two verses of Scripture; rather, it included a remembrance of the Ten Commandments, prayers of thanksgiving, and a remembrance of God's faithfulness during the Exodus from Egyptian slavery. It was a structured prayer that corresponded to the two daily sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem that occurred in the morning and in the evening. The Scriptures indicate that Jesus also prayed in this manner as a faithful Jew.

Even though the content of the prayer changed from the Jewish prayer to the Christian expression, the early Church held on to these fixed times for prayer. Later, as the Church grew, the celebration of the Eucharist was reserved for Sunday, but the faithful gathered daily at the bishop's church, his cathedral, for the singing of hymns and psalms in a more structured manner at specific hours of the day. Those times of prayer became known as the cathedral hours and took shape as ritual for offering a sacrifice of praise to God.

In the cathedral hours of the faithful, the rising of the sun was seen as a symbol of Christ, as was the lighting of candles for evensong. With such a devotion to the symbol of light, Psalm 63 became part of morning praise, and Psalm 141 became part of evensong. Psalm 63 speaks of seeking and pining for God. The Church recognized this psalm as a morning plea to pursue the Lord throughout the day, and Psalm 141 speaks of prayer as an evening sacrifice. As part of the sacrifice of praise, other psalms and hymns appropriate to the time of day found their way into the liturgy, in addition to Scripture readings, responses, canticles, and intercessory prayer. Eventually a sophisticated ritual for both morning praise and evensong emerged in the cathedrals. At the Second Vatican Council, the Church emphasized that the Liturgy of the Hours is to be celebrated faithfully so as to sanctify the day.

The Structure of the Liturgy of the Hours

The Liturgy of the Hours is structured in the following pattern:

- invocation
- hymn
- psalmody
- reading from the Scriptures
- response to the reading
- Gospel canticle
- intercessions
- dismissal



All liturgical prayer follows this pattern of dialogue. The Liturgy of the Hours is no exception. The presider calls us to prayer in the invocation, and the hymn brings together the many different voices into one. As communal prayer, it is vital to an authentic experience of prayer that the faithful gathered be forged as one body in Christ. The hymn serves that function.

Gathered as one body, the faithful offer a sacrifice of praise to God. In the Eucharistic celebration, the People of God offer the gifts of bread and wine. Likewise, the psalms as the inspired Word of God are gifts from God offered back to God. The psalms are words of perfect praise to the Lord and constitute a perfect sacrifice of praise. This dialogue with God continues as the Word of God is proclaimed in the Scriptures and the faithful respond as a community. After the response to the Scripture readings, the faithful pray the Gospel canticle. As morning praise and evensong are the hinges upon which the day turns, the Gospel canticles are hinges upon which the entire liturgies turn. In the morning the Canticle of Zechariah is sung as a hymn to God's faithfulness, faithfulness that has seen us through the night into the light of a new day. In the evening we sing the Canticle of Mary as a hymn to God's providence and justice. Throughout the day, we have seen God's Word go out and bear fruit. The hungry are filled, the lowly are raised high, and God has helped the people.

After the canticle the people are invited to bring their needs before the Lord. God's care for us invites us to ask: What are the needs of the Church, the world, and the community? What are our needs? All our prayers and petitions then culminate as we pray the perfect prayer, the Lord's Prayer. Finally, just as in the Eucharistic celebration, we are sent forth from our worship to live in the light and to bear the light of Christ to a world plagued by shadows.

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