

LITURGY OF THE HOURS

Let my prayer rise like incense before you, O God. (Psalm 141: 2)

WHAT IS THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS?

The Liturgy of the Hours is a collection of official public prayers of the Church, a companion to the **Liturgy of the Eucharist** (Mass). While Mass can be celebrated at most anytime, the Liturgy of the Hours is designed for specific times of the day. The two central times are **Morning Prayer** (in Latin, *Lauds – praise*) and **Evening Prayer** (in Latin, *Vespers – evening*). There are also settings for **Midday** (Midmorning, Midday (noon), and Midafternoon) as well as **Night** (in Latin, *Compline – end of the day*). And finally, there is the **Office of Readings** (known by its Latin name, *Matins – early morning*). It can be prayed at any time of the day and has some extended readings from scripture and other Christian Writers. (In monastic houses it is called “Vigils” and is celebrated around 3 or 4 AM).



WHO CAN PRAY THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS?

This prayer is designed for all Christians, but for many years seemed to be the special prayer of clergy and members of religious houses. The reforms of Vatican II simplified and translated the content into vernacular languages. Parishes, small groups and individuals are encouraged to use this prayer as a way of sanctifying each day.

*An interesting historical fact about the **Distribution of Ashes**... Ashes were traditionally blessed and distributed after singing the Hour of Terce (9:00AM, midmorning prayer), not as part of Mass. In even earlier centuries, the liturgy was a prayer service for Public Penitents who received sack cloth and ashes before they were expelled from the community. (They then spent the 40 days of Lent outside of the church building, asking for prayers and forgiveness from the faithful entering the church.) So when we distribute ashes outside of the Eucharist, we are following some very old traditions.*

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS?

This practice of praying to God using biblical texts pre-dates Christianity and was used as the primary means of worship by the Jews in the Temple of Jerusalem. We are told that Jesus and the Apostles went to the Temple daily and offered these prayers.

When Christianity spread to other parts of the Roman world, groups continued to gather for sharing “prayers, hymns and inspired songs” (Eph 5:19), either in local synagogues or in private homes with fellow Christians. By prayerfully meditating on the words of

the psalms and the other scriptures, Christians found a closeness to God and new insights into the person of Jesus. Christians of all ages have found this to be a way to praise God for all the blessings received, and an important and life-giving part of their daily prayer.

WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS?

All of these prayers can be recited, but most are meant to be sung, when possible. There is a four week cycle, along with material that reflects the current feast or season of the church year. The core of each hour of prayer consists of:

- ◆ **Psalms** (from the biblical Book of Psalms)
- ◆ **Canticles** (texts similar to psalms found in other books of the Bible)
- ◆ **Readings** (usually short selections from any book of the Bible)
- ◆ **Antiphons and Responsories** (short biblical phrases set to music)
- ◆ **Hymns** (religious text from various centuries, also set to music)
- ◆ **Petitions** (prayers for various needs)
- ◆ **Summary prayer** (similar to the Collect at Mass)

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