

What Is the Liturgy of the Hours?

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The Church tells time in two ways. The first is according to the liturgical year, which encompasses feasts and liturgical seasons such as Advent, Lent, and Ordinary Time. The other way in which the Church tells time is hourly. Thus, the Holy See has a four-volume ritual for praying the hours. It provides the official ritual for praying the hours: morning, daytime prayer, midmorning prayer, daytime hours (midmorning prayer, midafternoon prayer, and midday prayer from which one daytime hour is chosen to pray), Evening Prayer, and Night Prayer. The Liturgy of the Hours goes back to the early Church.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians states, "pray without ceasing" (5:17). Early Christian communities interpreted this phrase either strictly, that is, praying as closely as possible to non-stop, or more loosely in the sense of praying throughout the day. Communities would gather to pray from the book of Psalms, perhaps scripture and a canticle. Some monks would pray the 150 psalms within one week, while some city parishes would take up to four weeks to pray the 150 psalms. In whichever way these communities prayed at hours, they were trying to be faithful to the Thessalonian injunction to "pray without ceasing."

Later on in history, while the participation of the lay faithful in the Liturgy of the Hours diminished, clerics were obligated to pray the hours. With the advent of the Second Vatican Council, a renewed sense of the hours was opened up to lay participation. The Council stressed the ecclesial dimension of the prayer. In this sense, "it is the very prayer that Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father" (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 84). The body of Christ is one of the scriptural images the Council used to describe the understanding of the Church's nature. The priesthood of Christ continues within the Church (CSL, 83.2). The Church, ordained

and laypeople, praise and intercede "for the salvation of the whole world" (ibid). In praying the hours, then, the Church is participating in Christ's priestly ministry of restoring the world—the cosmos—back to God the Father. This is what it means when the Constitution states, "the purpose of the office [that is, the Liturgy of the Hours] is to sanctify the day" (CSL, 88).

In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the first document of the Council, the hours of morning and evening are "the two hinges" of the hours of the day. More scripture was added and finally a four-week cycle of praying the 150 psalms was legislated. In 1971, an Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours was promulgated. Some of the revisions to the hours included more biblical canticles. Psalms should as closely as possible be tied to the hour and hymns added to each hour. The structure for the official Liturgy of the Hours is as follows: an invitational, a hymn, two or three psalms followed by a respective prayer, a canticle from scripture, a psalm of praise with a collect, a selection from scripture, a response, a Gospel canticle, the Lord's Prayer, a prayer, blessing, and an optional sign of peace in a communal setting.

Even though clerics are obligated to pray the hours, and laypeople are not, many parishes pray one or two of the "hinges" of the Liturgy of the Hours: Morning Prayer and/or Evening Prayer. Thus, during Advent and Lent, parishes may offer Evening Prayer. The *Order of Christian Funerals*, 348, states that vigils (or wakes) may take place in the context of Evening Prayer as well as the option of Morning Prayer on the day of the funeral. These are just a few ways in which the hours have been opened up to more and more of the laity in order to "pray without ceasing."

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