

1. The Structure of the Liturgy

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Two aspects of the Liturgy of the Hours were established in the very early history of the Church: the praying of the Psalms, and the consecration of every hour to God.

Taking this literally meant that prayer of some kind was offered every three hours, day and night, and confined the full implementation of such a liturgy to hermits, enthusiasts, and dedicated religious orders.

At times, their achievements seem to us to be more heroic than spiritual, and this is certainly what we would feel if we went through all 150 psalms every week, or even every day (but that may say more about us than about the people who did this). Human frailty, too, demanded that one sleep more than two and a half hours at a stretch, and so, in various reforms and adjustments through the ages, the schedule has been made rather more human - though even today some of the stricter contemplative orders stay close to the original ideal.

The last batch of reforms, completed in 1970 and revised in 1985, has made the Liturgy of the Hours usable not only by priests and religious but also by lay people who have a living to earn and a life to lead. Here is the basic structure:

Lauds

Also known as **Morning Prayer**. This hour is prayed at sunrise or in the early morning. It is one of the two most important (hinge) hours of the Office and, if possible, should be prayed in common. There is a hymn, two psalms (or bits of psalms if they are long), an Old Testament canticle (basically a psalm that happens not to be in the Book of Psalms), a short reading, and prayers of intercession. In public celebration, it is possible for Mass to follow straight on from this Hour.

The Little Hours

These are also known as Prayer through the Day: Terce (the third hour in Roman reckoning, or mid-morning), Sext (the sixth hour: noon), and None (pronounced to rhyme with "moan", this is the ninth hour, or mid-afternoon). In the post-Vatican II reform of the office, it is suggested that one of these hours, that which is most convenient for the individual, be prayed. These hours are short, so as not to be too much of an interruption, but because they still *are* an interruption, most lay people won't want to bother with them.

Vespers

Also known as **Evening Prayer** or Evensong. This Hour takes us from the bustle of the day to the calm of evening. This hour is prayed at sunset, i.e. late afternoon or early evening. It is the second of the hinge hours and, like Morning Prayer, should be prayed in common if possible. There is a hymn, two psalms, a New Testament canticle (usually a hymn from St Paul or a song of triumph from the Apocalypse), a short reading, and prayers of intercession. Sundays and important feasts are considered to start the **night before** (like the Jewish Sabbath) and have so-called "First Vespers" or Evening Prayer I on that night.

Compline

Also known as **Night Prayer**, and sometimes combined into the public celebration of Vespers. It is the last prayer of the day, and sums up all that went before, as we examine our consciences and offer the actions of the day to God. Here, sleep is a symbol of death, and the theme is complete trust and confidence. It ends as all turn to Mary and traditionally sing the *Salve Regina*.

The Office of Readings

This is a splendid innovation of the latest reforms. Unlike the other Hours, **it can be said at any time of day at all**, whenever time and energy and circumstances allow you to pray and meditate. Moreover, it contains more substantial material for meditation, in the form of a solid Bible reading of a chapter or so (we only give you the references so that you can use your favourite translation, and we also have a link, where possible, to an online version). Then comes the glory of the whole Liturgy - a second reading, which is not biblical but is taken from the earliest centuries of the Church, or from old homilies whose very authors have been forgotten, or from the writings or biographies of the saints. It is an immense task to fill this site with second readings, and will take a year or more... so please be patient.

The Invitatory Psalm

The Invitatory Psalm acts as a kind of introduction to the entire Divine Office for the day. When you say it therefore depends on which hour you recite first. If you start with Lauds, say it at the beginning of Lauds; if you start with the Office of Readings (which, you will recall, can be recited at any time of the day), then say the invitatory psalm at the beginning of the Office of Readings. If all that you recite in the day is Vespers, then say the invitatory psalm at the beginning of Vespers. This site lets you view versions of Lauds and the Office of Readings both with and without the invitatory psalm.

What has happened to Matins?

Matins was originally the office of Vigils, prayer offered in the middle of the night, but understandable human weakness moved it to the early morning; nevertheless, it retained its character of a night prayer, even being subdivided into between one and three parts called "nocturns". This office was the longest one of the day, containing between nine and eighteen psalms, plus readings from the Old and New Testaments and from the Fathers. While such an office is reasonably suited to religious orders, who can order their day round their prayer, it is less well adapted to people who are living in the world, for whom first thing in the morning may not necessarily be the best time to study and meditate in depth. Accordingly, the latest reforms have transformed Matins into the Office of Readings and removed its specifically nocturnal character. It has, instead, the most meditative psalms and those that narrate the course of salvation history; and it can be said at any hour of the day or night.

What has happened to Prime?

It has been abolished. It was, in any case, a relatively recent innovation, being introduced after the other hours had already been established. The manner of its introduction was this: around the year 382, in one of the monasteries near Bethlehem, a problem arose, because after the night offices (which corresponded to the more modern Matins and Lauds), the monks could retire to rest. The lazier ones then stayed in bed until nine in the morning (the hour of Terce) instead of getting up to do their manual work or spiritual reading. The short office of Prime, inserted a couple of hours before Terce, solved the problem, by calling them together to pray and sending them out to their tasks.

2. How to Recite the Hours

*There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing tribal laws,
And every single one of them is right!*

RUDYARD KIPLING

This is an informal summary of the **General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours**. The full text can be found in most breviaries (at the start of Vol. 1 of multi-volume sets).

In contrast with the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours is relatively free in its specification of how things should be done. The texts, psalms, and prayers are the important things, and after that, many variations are allowed according to local circumstances and tradition.

Bodily posture

The General Instruction concerns itself with public celebration of the Divine Office. In private recitation you should adopt whatever posture seems reasonable and appropriate. Similarly, in recitation within a small group (such as a family) the aim is to assist the devotional aspect of the Office and not to cause a distraction-- frequently, an unvarying posture (standing or sitting) is best. For your information, however, here is a brief summary of what happens in a public celebration:

- All **stand** during the introduction to the Office and during the opening hymn (if there is one)..
- All **sit** during the readings (except Gospel readings).
- All **stand** during the *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, or *Nunc Dimittis*, and during the concluding prayers.
- During the psalms, people may **sit or stand**, according to local custom.
- All **cross themselves** at the start of each Hour and at the start of the canticle: *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, or *Nunc Dimittis*.
- All make a **profound bow** at the invocation of the Trinity in the Doxology (Glory Be).
- **Kneeling** is not recommended.

Reciting the psalms

Each psalm in the Divine Office has a title, which is not intended to be read out loud, but which helps in the understanding of its significance. *This title comes from the Old Testament. There is also a Caption, which comes from the New Testament or from the Patristics.* Each psalm is also given an **antiphon**. The antiphon may be said once, at the beginning of the psalm; or once at the beginning and once at the end (either before or after the Glory Be); or additionally between every verse of the psalm. Which of these methods is chosen is up to whoever is organizing the recitation: if you are doing it on your own, then you have to choose for yourself.

In a celebration of the Hours by more than one person, it is also possible to alternate the verses, between two choirs or two parts of the congregation. In this case it is probably less appropriate to insert the antiphon after every verse.

When a **longer psalm** has been split into parts, each part can be treated as a separate psalm, or the parts can be united into a single, longer psalm, with the Glory Be said only once, at the very end.

Pacing

The recitation should be deliberate and unhurried, to hear God speaking in the spaces of silence.

Readings

Lauds and Vespers have short Biblical readings . It is always permissible to substitute appropriate longer readings for these: for instance, the Mass reading of the day.

Responsories

Responsories (See Compline) follow readings in the Liturgy, and help to meditate on the significance of those readings. In individual recitation, the repeated part of the responsory can be omitted, unless the meaning demands that it be kept.

Prayers and Intercessions

These start with an introduction and a short response, and there then follow a number of intentions, each of which is in two halves. Here are the two methods recommended by the General Instruction:

1. The priest or minister says the introduction and the people give the response. Then the priest says both halves of each intention and the people repeat the response.
2. The priest or minister says the introduction and the people give the response. Then the priest says the first half of each intention and the people say the second half (the response is not used again).

When reciting the Office on your own, choose whatever is most comfortable. The second method usually works better. It is permissible to add special intentions at Morning Prayer and at Evening Prayer.

The Office of Readings

This may be said at any time - even after Vespers of the previous night. It helps, though, to try to say it at a regular time each day.

Joining different Offices together

Where circumstances require it, the public celebration of a particular Hour may be merged with the Mass, or with another Hour. The rules for doing this are rather complicated, and can be found in the General Instruction referred to at the start of this page. Not all scholars agree that they should be combined, referring to the joining as “mauds and mespers.”

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3. Outline of the Liturgy of the Hours

Morning Prayer

(The structure for each prayer is similar, with some variations.*)

Morning Prayer structure: *(Be sure that all have worship aid)*

Entrance Procession *May begin with all seated in place*

The beginning of the hour (all standing) *Sign of the cross*

or **Introduction to Daily Office** –

Invitatory *Sign of the cross on lips*

Doxology (Glory Be...) *Profound bow at name of Trinity*

Invitatory psalm

Hymn (all standing)- corresponds to time of day and season, crucial to setting the tone

Psalms *all sitting or standing*

(Below the psalm number, there is a Title, of Old Testament origin put in Christic context, then a Caption, from New Testament or Patristic source)

Antiphon 1

Psalm, *147 psalms used; 3 imprecatory (cursing) psalms omitted*

Doxology:

Antiphon 1

Psalm Prayer (*optional*)

Silence *It is the silence that God speaks!*

Antiphon 2,

Canticle,

Doxology

Antiphon 2

Psalm Prayer (*optional*)

Silence

Antiphon 3,

Psalm,

Doxology

Antiphon 3

Psalm Prayer (*optional*).

Silence

Scripture Reading *all sit* *May be lengthened*

- Brief **Homily** may follow

Silence

Short **Responsory** or psalm

Gospel Canticle

Gospel Canticle Antiphon (sitting) *Incense may be prepared*

Canticle (all standing) *Make sign of cross at beginning*

Antiphon repeated

Intercessions – *choice of through composed response; or invariable response with large gathering*

Our Father

Concluding Prayer

Blessing and Dismissal *Alternative form for lay presider*

***Evening Prayer** may include additional elements: *Lucerarium* (lighting of candles), incense rite at Psalm 141 and Canticle of Mary (*Magnificat*).