

A CALL TO PRAYER

The Liturgy of the Hours



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BISHOPS COMMITTEE ON
THE LITURGY

National Conference Of
Catholic Bishops

1977

Publications Office

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20005

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Introduction

The Lord Jesus, by word and example, taught his disciples that prayer is normative for the Christian believer. His life was spent in prayer: reflection alone in the desert, morning and evening prayer in the synagogue, praying with his disciples. Jesus was a 'man of prayer' in every sense of the word, for communication with his heavenly Father was indicative of his whole life's work and mission. Even now, the risen Lord forever lives to make intercession for us (see Hebrews 7:25). He is the supreme and eternal Priest and our prayer is meant to be a participation in his heavenly liturgy. Prayer is the language of the city of God. Our motivation in prayer is to be joined to the Lord, to make his prayer ours, in the hope that ours will be his.

Christian prayer, like the prayer of Jesus, is living in the presence of God in an intimate communion of praise and thanksgiving, of reflection and supplication. The mighty works of God in the history of his people and in the personal history of the believer are the ground of all prayer. It is the creative and loving kindness of God in our individual lives and in the Christian communities which enables us to sing out his praises and makes us confident enough to place before him our most pressing needs, our most urgent desires, and our most anxious pleas.

Thus, whether it is the meditative prayer of the Christian alone in a room or the surging hymns and petitions of the liturgical assembly, Christian prayer finds its center in the person of Jesus Christ because it is in the name of the Lord Jesus that we pray, and in his name that our assemblies are formed.

The "necessity of praying always and never losing heart" (Luke 18:1) is the basis of the Christian's obligation to pray. From the earliest

times the Church has interpreted Christ's norm in two directions: personal prayer and liturgical prayer. The Lord's Prayer provided the model for personal Christian prayer. It is praise and petition, confidence and thanksgiving all in one movement offered to the Father.

Liturgical prayer, when the ecclesial assembly gathers together, also models itself on the life and example of Jesus. Jesus was ever attentive to the festivals of Israel. Attendance at Temple and synagogue expressed his own piety. His very act of redemption is given to us to celebrate in the context of the most basic of Jewish liturgical rites: the home seder. In the same way, the liturgy of the hours or Divine Office from the days of the early Church to our own, is modeled on the hinges of synagogue sabbath worship, Morning and Evening Prayer. The Office is an expression of "the necessity of praying always," day after day, hour by hour.

The Second Vatican Council decreed a thorough reform of the liturgy of the hours so that it would truly express the sanctification of time and the consecration of the Christian's life in a rhythm not unlike that of the life of the Lord himself. By its nature, the Office is a priestly work of the whole Christian people and mirrors the eternal praise offered by the heavenly court. It is the rich source of personal prayer also. For the liturgy of the hours familiarizes us with the psalms and Scriptures. It teaches us confidently to offer our petitions to the Lord day after day. In morning and evening we pray the Lord's Prayer and the gospel canticles proclaiming God's marvelous deeds. The Office nourishes us through song and prayer for the Sunday eucharistic assembly. Indeed, it is the prolongation of the central eucharistic theme of praise and thanksgiving. Ultimately, through the celebration of the hours we are placed in more intimate contact with the mystery of Christ made present in the liturgical year.

In many ways then the liturgy of the hours is a school of prayer for all Christians. There we learn to pray. Through the Office the community, that is the Church, is manifested. Thus the

obligation to pray the hours is serious for the whole Church, particularly those in orders who lead the assembly to celebrate this liturgy daily, and who have, in a special way, given themselves to public ministry within the Church.

The Liturgy Revised

The work of revising the traditional Roman Office took several years. The basic Latin text, prepared by the Apostolic See at the mandate of the Second Vatican Council, was published in 1971 and 1972 under the title *Liturgia Horarum*. In turn, this text was faithfully rendered into contemporary English by the International Commission on English in the Liturgy, sponsored by some eleven bishops' conferences and serving the Church in their countries and many other countries of the world. This translation, which was published in 1974 and 1975, is the only version approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for the Church in the United States. It appears in editions issued by several publishers.

The new *Liturgy of the Hours*, whether in its complete form or in volumes of excerpts (*Christian Prayer*), has a number of distinctive features which show the goals sought by the Second Vatican Council: a simplified and somewhat abbreviated structure; a vastly enlarged range of biblical and non-biblical readings, the latter not only from the Fathers and traditional writers, but also from modern sources; psalm prayers to give a Christian reflection upon the Old Testament songs of praise; canticles from Scripture not used in the previous Office; new intercessory prayers in litany form; wide flexibility and adaptability in the use of texts. Even apart from the official approbation of Church authority, the Roman *Liturgy of the Hours* is a vastly improved collection of prayer services for the hours of each day of the Christian year.

The Liturgy of the Hours is preceded, as was the restored Order of Mass in 1969, by an important General Instruction. This lengthy document goes far beyond the introductory material

of the old *Breviarium Romanum*. It gives not only necessary directions but also a careful description of all the elements which make up the liturgy of the hours and, still more important, the basic rationale for common services of prayer in the Christian community. The riches of the liturgical Office, the relation and flexibility of the parts, and the like are all explained in the General Instruction.

The Prayer of the Church

Perhaps the most difficult and challenging task is to make the liturgy of the hours in fact and practice, as well as in theory and doctrine, the prayer of the entire Church. It is several decades since the celebration of Sunday Prayer or Vespers practically disappeared from parishes in this country. The best efforts of the liturgical movement in the 1940s and 1950s to restore Sunday Vespers or Compline to parish use had only minimal success. The singing of Sunday Vespers was largely limited to seminaries; the singing of anything like the whole Office was largely limited to religious communities.

To introduce, in 1977, the common celebration of even some part of the Church's liturgical prayer in parishes and similar communities and gatherings will require extraordinary efforts, which are beyond the immediate purpose or scope of this statement to suggest. Such a development will be aided considerably, however, by the providential growth of groups, houses, and associations for prayer; by the practice among priests and others of voluntarily gathering to pray some part of the liturgy of the hours; by making it part of the prayer of meetings of priests' senates, diocesan and parish councils and of the prayer life of seminaries, rectories, and religious communities; and by greater familiarity with styles of common prayer similar to the official liturgy. Above all, it will be helpful if those accustomed to pray the Office alone, especially priests and deacons, gather others from their parishes to join with them in common prayer.

The Responsibility to Pray

As we look forward to the popular celebration of some hours of the liturgical Office, there remains the special question of the responsibility of the Church's ordained ministers to pray the liturgy of the hours. In the past, the canons of Church law have indeed placed first stress upon the responsibility of common and choral celebration, but they have been likewise explicit about the individual responsibility of pastors, of professed religious, and of the clergy in major orders. If anything, the responsibility of the ordained ministers of the Church, the clergy, has been made more emphatic in recent years by asking that, upon admission to the order of deacons, each minister publicly commit himself to pray the liturgy of the hours. The clergy and religious must also bear in mind that the laity, with great confidence in the fruitfulness of prayers offered by their bishops, priests, deacons, and religious, often request these prayers. Furthermore, we cannot forget that the faithful, sometimes at great personal sacrifice, support their clergy and religious so that they may have ample time to fulfill their ministry of prayer for the entire Church.

As is well known, in the period immediately prior to the Second Vatican Council, the sense of obligation to pray the Office was somewhat eroded. This came about partly because some, perhaps very many, felt that the burden of the Latin Office was not commensurate with the prayerful purpose of the Church. Even after many bishops, in virtue of the Council's decision in 1963, had permitted the use of the approved English breviaries, other difficulties (such as the complexity, formality, and even archaic nature of the unrevised Office) were still felt—again by some and perhaps by very many—to be so great as to excuse from the obligation.

Many efforts were made to resolve these difficulties during the period between the enactment of the Constitution on the Liturgy and the appearance of the revised *Liturgy of the Hours*. In virtue of the conciliar decree, many bishops (and other ordinaries) granted generous dispensa-

tions from the obligation of the daily Office, either in whole or in part. Such dispensations were most suitable when pastoral responsibilities, for example, occupied much of the morning hours when priests would have properly prayed Matins and Lauds. Even more frequently and with great concern for the underlying need for prayer by the Church's ministers, many bishops permitted the commutation of the hours of the Office again in whole or in part, with other kinds of prayer and religious reading. The latter were intended to be suitable substitutes or commutations: purely reflective or meditative prayer, although of the greatest importance, is not the same as the psalter or the formal prayers of petition and intercession. Again, while spiritual reading, whether of the Scriptures or of religious writings, is of the greatest value, it has a different character when done in the setting of the liturgical hours of readings, with the traditional psalms of praise, responsive prayer, etc.

A very appropriate substitution during this period was the interim breviary of 1971. Patterned closely on the forthcoming revision, *The Prayer of Christians* provided perhaps the best provisional solutions to the various difficulties which had been experienced. The Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, which prepared this volume, deserves universal gratitude for its contribution to the Church's prayer life from all who have used *The Prayer of Christians* in common or individually.

Finally, many otherwise bound to the liturgical hours of the Office, felt that there were serious reasons which by themselves excused them from the daily Office on occasion or even regularly. There is of course a danger of self-deception in this kind of decision, but there are certainly reasons or causes which, considered objectively, do excuse from the Office as from other precepts of Church Law.

Such possibilities—dispensations, commutations, excusing causes—still remain now that the completely revised *Liturgy of the Hours* is available to the Church in this country. The

difficulties and problems, however, which were associated with the form, text, style, and length of the Office no longer exist, and the interim breviaries themselves have been replaced. In other words, although dispensation, commutation or substitution, and excusing causes may well be appropriate in a reduced number of cases, difficulties intrinsic to the official prayer itself are few indeed.

The General Instruction which introduces *The Liturgy of the Hours* makes the point that the Lord's injunction to pray is not mere legalism; it should not be seen as a purely legal regulation. The same is true of the mandate to celebrate the liturgy of the hours, a mandate which is accepted by the ordained ministers of the Church and others. Communities and individuals should not pray the hours merely, exclusively, or even principally because they are so bound by custom or precept. On the contrary, the very goodness of praying in, with, and for the Church—which, as the redeemed people of God pray in union with the Lord Jesus himself and with his Holy Spirit—should be enough reason to celebrate the liturgical Office.

The canons which were replaced in 1971 by the General Instruction to *The Liturgy of the Hours*, defined the obligation for the clergy in very simple terms without qualification, namely, as “the obligation of reciting the canonical hours in their entirety each day according to one's proper and approved liturgical books.” The Constitution on the Liturgy explicitly reaffirmed this precept, while lessening the quantity of the Office—by suppressing the hour of Prime and permitting the omission of two of the three other lesser hours.

The General Instruction, speaking of the mandate which ordained ministers freely accept on the occasion of their admission to the order of deacons, uses similar language of bishops, priests, and deacons who are to pray “the full sequence of hours each day” and to do this while respecting as far as possible the relation of the several hours of prayer to the appropriate times of day.

A special provision is then made for the responsibility of permanent deacons to pray the liturgy of the hours, which has been left to the conference of bishops to determine. In the United States the Bishops' Committee on the Permanent Diaconate has simply encouraged the deacons to pray Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer "as expressing the praise of God from the entire Church community." In view of the particular style of life and circumstances of most permanent deacons, it is appropriate that this be done with their families.

The Importance of the Various Hours

The General Instruction, however, deliberately departs from the canons by expanding the statement quoted above (to pray "the full sequence of hours each day") and by introducing distinctions. These distinctions suggest the varying weight of the different liturgical hours and the priorities among them, which are to be judged reasonably and certainly without scruples.

In harmony with the Council's decision and the intrinsic nature of the hours as revised, the General Instruction speaks first of the principal hours, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. Bishops, priests, and deacons should be careful not to omit these hours "except for serious reason." This clearly means that such an omission by those who have the mandate to celebrate the Office should be exceptional. The General Instruction, however, is careful not to go further. It thus leaves to the ordained ministers the discretion to judge the seriousness of the cause which may allow the omission of one or both of the chief parts of the daily liturgy of the hours.

A secondary place is given to the still very important hour or Office of Readings, formerly called Matins and now to be observed at any convenient time of the day. With regard to it, the General Instruction says that bishops, priests, and deacons "faithfully" carry out this hour, the more so because, even when prayed by an individual, it is a liturgical celebration of God's word. To receive that word into our lives makes us "more perfect disciples of the Lord."

Thus, without minimizing in any way this part of the liturgy of the hours, one may say that a lesser reason excuses from its observance than the serious reason mentioned in the case of the two chief hours, Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer.

Finally, the General Instruction speaks of the lesser hours for those who have accepted the Church's mandate to celebrate the liturgical prayer. These are the daytime hour (in effect, one of the three liturgical hours formerly called Terce, Sext, and None) and Night Prayer or Compline. Bishops, priests, and deacons "will have also at heart the recitation" of these two hours.

Conclusion

To speak at length on the specific details of the mandate to pray the hours, for those who have this responsibility within the community of the Church, may seem to contradict the more basic statement that it is the prayer itself rather than an ecclesiastical precept which should motivate the ordained ministers of the Church. It may seem to be a return to a legalism which the official texts avoid. Yet the responsibility is a genuine one which we must not sidestep, and it reflects the Church's expectation that its ministers will be leaders of prayer and praise within the Christian assembly. It is with this understanding that, keeping in mind the proportion and relationship of the several hours of the daily Office, Pope Paul VI in 1970 explained: "Those who have received from the Church a mandate to celebrate the liturgy of the hours are to complete its entire course dutifully each day, keeping as far as possible to the appropriate time of the day; first and foremost, they are to give due importance to Morning and Evening Prayer." And he adds immediately that those in holy orders (and, similarly, religious) "should not only be moved to celebrate the hours through obedience to law, but should also feel themselves drawn to them because of their intrinsic excellence and their pastoral and ascetical values. . . . The public prayer of the

Church should be offered by all from hearts renewed, in acknowledgement of the intimate relationship within the whole body of the Church, which, like its Head, cannot be described except in terms of a Church that prays."

All who lawfully dispense from the responsibility of the liturgy of the hours or permit some appropriate substitution for parts of it should be deeply aware of the intrinsic goodness of the liturgical Office when they weigh the reasons for exceptions to the ordinary expectation of the Church. All the more this should be the concern of anyone who has accepted the mandate in making the judgment whether on occasion he or she is excused from this responsibility.

Contemporary circumstances may have eroded the sense of prayer and of liturgical prayer. Still more serious, the Church's prayer had come to be thought of as an individual and private task, often considered a burden undertaken purely because of the customary precept. Now the interim period of waiting for a refined and richer Office is over. In virtue of authority given it by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, with the concurrence of the conference's president, has set November 27, 1977 as the official effective date for the use of *The Liturgy of the Hours* in the dioceses of the United States. *The Liturgy of the Hours* is thus the single official version in English approved by the conference of bishops and confirmed by the Apostolic See for this country. After this date, only *The Liturgy of the Hours*, as it appears in several authorized editions, or the *Liturgia Horarum* in Latin may be used for the liturgical observance, whether in common or by individuals, of the Church's Office of prayer according to the Roman rite.

In the interim period many communities and individuals in the Church have faithfully observed the daily liturgy of the hours, with the adaptations and substitutions permitted and with the help of such texts as the interim breviaries. The purpose of this statement is to introduce *The Liturgy of the Hours*, as explained so well in the General Instruction, into general and

exclusive use as the public, common prayer of the Church. No one underestimates the pastoral challenge of celebrating even some small part of the liturgical prayer in communities such as parishes which are unfamiliar with it. It is both the responsibility and opportunity for priests, who are the leaders of the Christian community, to assemble the praying people of God and join with them in the Church's prayer. But the first and necessary step is that the ordained ministers of the Church and others who have the Church's mandate to pray the Office, both in common and individually, should employ it to the full.

