

The Liturgy of The Hours



Part 1

The work of the people of God

What do we understand by the word “liturgy?” If someone says that she has just returned from a liturgy, would we ever stop to ask exactly what kind of liturgy it was in which she had taken part? Most Catholics would not ask because we have come to think that liturgy means the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist. In fact, celebrations of the anointing of the sick in a hospital room, of the sacrament of reconciliation in a confessional or chapel and the distribution of ashes outside Mass are all liturgies.

This bulletin supplement and the three which will follow explore still another liturgy which has traditionally played an important role in Catholic prayer, namely, the Liturgy of the Hours. “The what?” you say! You say you’ve never heard this term and you have no idea what it has to do with Sunday Mass.

The widespread ignorance of this public prayer form bears witness to its disappearance over the centuries as the daily prayer of all Christians. Yet Christians of the first three centuries would have been as familiar with this liturgical prayer form as they were with the Sunday Eucharist. Reduced to its simplest expression the Liturgy of the Hours is Christian Morning and Evening Prayer.

Early Christians did not call their domestic prayer at the rising and setting of the sun the Liturgy of the Hours, nor do most small groups of Christians today

who gather for prayer at the beginning and end of their work day. The name is not the issue; framing the day in prayer is. Christians hold this in common with men and women of other religious traditions in every age and culture.

Even in a technological world where we can control light and heat as never before in history, no one of us is immune to the effects of the rising and setting of the sun, the promise of a new day, our thanksgiving and sense of repentance at its ending, the hopeful anticipation of the next dawn. Over the centuries Jews and Christians have brought to these sentiments the word of God so that dawn and dusk become privileged signs of God’s abiding presence shaping our daily lives. And yet in modern times we seem to have lost our ability to mark these times with prayer. Can the Liturgy of the Hours help us to recapture these special moments of prayer?

This question returns us to our original inquiry: what do we mean by *liturgy*. The word *liturgy* comes from the Greek *leitourgia* which in turn is derived from two more basic Greek words: *laos* which means people (we also get the word laity from this root) and *ergon* which means work (this root is also found in the English word *energy*).

Liturgy is a work, a work of the people. In Greek society it referred especially to works done for the

good of the whole people, for example, the building of a bridge.

Whenever we, the People of God, come together for the Church's official public prayer we do that work which is for our own good and the good of all the world, namely, the praise of God to which all our other words and works are directed. This is liturgy.

In the course of the centuries what was the prayer-work of *all* the people came to be seen more and more as the work of *some* of the people, namely, the clergy. Catholics never ceased to pray in the morning and at night but these prayers were said in private. The public celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer, like the celebration of Mass and the other sacraments, became more and more the work of priests and religious.

The renewal of the Catholic Church in our age is in large part a movement to recapture *leitourgia*, public prayer, as the work of *all* God's baptized People. The restoration of public Morning and Evening Prayer (the latter sometimes also called Vespers) is a small but important part of that effort.

"What's in it for me?" you ask. Only the individual can answer that question. If this is really liturgy, however, we can ask what's in it for the Church. That brings us back to the fact that many Catholics have come to identify liturgy with Mass. That is somewhat like identifying all meals with Thanksgiving dinner. Human beings, among all God's creatures, are the most remarkable eaters. We will try almost anything and we have the broadest diet of any animal on earth. So it is with the diet of our spiritual life. The same liturgical diet is as uninteresting as an unchanging dinner menu. Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours are not opposed to one

another any more than Sunday brunch is opposed to Christmas dinner. In fact, each makes the other richer.

The Liturgy of the Hours provides the Church with a broader and richer offering of scripture and symbol, a greater range of possibility to praise God and to make intercession for the needs of all creation. The Liturgy of the Hours is, in fact, *leitourgia* for the entire world. When Pope Paul VI issued new rites for this celebration he pointed out that the Church as a community is united to Christ both as spouse and as intercessor before God for the welfare of the world. The Liturgy of the Hours has some key elements which flow from this relationship. They are:

1. A connection to time

The rising and setting of the sun, our pause at noon, prayer before bed, and occasional night vigil are all moments which lead us to praise God for the gift of light and to make petition for divine protection in any darkness which besets us.

2. Praise

God is praised in hymns, psalms and scriptural canticles of praise in addition to psalms of lament and remorse.

3. Proclamation

The Word of God is proclaimed from Scripture.

4. Intercession

In Morning and Evening Prayer, prayers of intercession are offered for the needs of the world.

Our appreciation for Sundays and seasons, feasts of the Lord, Mary, and the saints is by no means exhausted by what we proclaim, hear, and celebrate at Mass. In fact, our celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours can only help to deepen our appreciation for the rich tradition that is our Catholic faith.

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