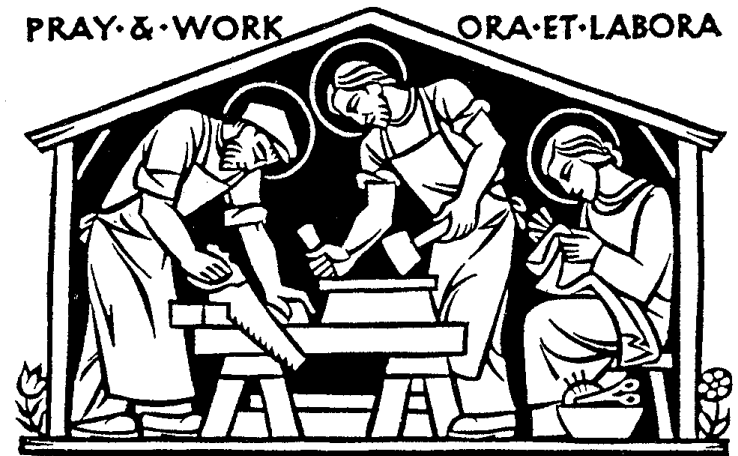


OBLATES OF SAINT BENEDICT:

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY

ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS



1. What exactly is the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office)?

The Divine Office is a crucial element of Benedictine life, prayer, and spirituality. It is the prayer of the entire Catholic Church – the Church’s preeminent liturgy after the Mass. The Divine Office is also variously referred to as the Liturgy of the Hours, the Canonical Hours, the Divine Liturgy, the Daily Office, Opus Dei (its Latin name and the term used for it by St. Benedict), or often simply as “the Office” or “the Daily.” Protestants have adapted and modified it for their purposes, using its emphasis on the psalms in a reduced form that became widely known as “the

Psalter,” which is another term often applied to the Divine Office, or at least a significant portion of it.

The *Oblate Formation Booklet* (revised edition) for Oblates and Oblate novices affiliated with Saint Vincent Archabbey states, “The Liturgy of the Hours is the official prayer of the Church which marks off the various parts of the day as sacred, i.e., consecrated to God. Praying the Hours provides Christians with the occasion to sanctify daily life and thus make it an offering to God” (p. 48).

Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion, O.S.B., reflects at length upon the Divine Office in two of his works. In *Christ, the Ideal of the Monk*, he emphasizes that the Liturgy of the Hours is praise: “Doubtless, the Divine Office contains petitions, prayers ... but this is not its dominant element; before all, the Divine Office is praise The direct aim of the Office is to confess and exalt the Divine perfections, to delight in them, and thank God for them” (p. 293). The blessed abbot explains later, “What further renders the Divine Praise extremely pleasing to God is that it constitutes an homage of those virtues of faith, hope and love which are the specific virtues of our state as children of God” (p. 303).

In his book *The Liturgy of the Hours: The General Instruction with Commentary*, A.-M. Roguet, O.P., a French Dominican, agrees with Blessed Abbot Columba and expands this idea using the unceasing praise sung before the throne of God and the Lamb in the Book of Revelation: “In the Liturgy of the Hours we proclaim this faith, we express and nurture this hope, and we share the joy of giving unceasing praise in the day which knows no end As well as praising God, the Church’s liturgy expresses the hopes and prayers of all the Christian faithful and intercedes before Christ and through him before the Father for the salvation of the whole world. This voice is not only of the Church but of Christ” (p. 23).

The preface to one popular breviary, *Shorter Christian Prayer*, describes the Divine Office by highlighting its strong

emphasis on God’s Word: “Those taking part in *The Liturgy of the Hours* have access to holiness of the richest kind through the life-giving word of God, to which it gives such great importance. The readings are drawn from Sacred Scripture, God’s words in the psalms are sung in his presence, and the intercessions, prayers, and hymns are steeped in the inspired language of Scripture” (p. 7). This preface goes on to say, “*The Liturgy of the Hours*, distributed over various periods of each day, is intended to sanctify time and work” (p. 7). This immediately brings to mind the Benedictine motto *Ora et Labora* – Prayer and Work.

A French Benedictine monk, Mayuel de Dreuille, O.S.B., in his recent book, *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Commentary in Light of World Ascetic Traditions*, points out clearly that the Office as developed in the *Rule* stresses service. He says, “Another aspect of the Divine Office can be seen in the special meaning that is given to the word *service*. Saint Benedict considers the life and prayer of the monk as a service to the Church, *a service of devotion* which should be carried out without laziness, but with courage and love” (p. 196). De Dreuille goes on to say, “But the most remarkable aspect of Benedictine prayer is its essential relationship with liturgy The ‘Work of God’, the choir office, framing the daily activities of the community, is thus one of the most characteristic features of the Benedictine way of life. It nourishes the monks’ spiritual life and is a *duty of service* (RB 50, 4) entrusted to them by the Church. Through it they pray and praise God in the name of the whole of mankind” (p. 204).

Very simply stated, the Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, has its own structure, utilizing familiar elements that are common to other Christian celebrations and worship, and is prayed at designated times during the course of the day. The most essential elements for each of its parts, or “Hours,” are the following and are arranged in this sequence: an opening verse, a hymn, the psalmody (the singing or recitation of designated psalms), a shorter or longer reading from Scripture, and concluding prayers.

2. What are the daily parts, or “Hours,” of the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office)?

The Liturgy of the Hours has been very much “a work in progress” over the centuries. All Christian prayer, including the Divine Office, has its roots in Jewish prayer, which is based upon the singing of the psalms at fixed times and the reading of Holy Scripture. Setting out from this Jewish tradition, Christians during the first centuries of the Church developed four basic times of prayer in common: morning and evening prayers, daytime prayers, and night prayers. Generally, only the first two were practiced regularly by the Christian community, and from the outset they were *liturgical*; i.e., they were formalized, had structure, and were prayed communally.

Monks living in community were the first to put together a complete Office with fixed times daily for the monastic community to gather in prayer. These gatherings at prayer also had set formulas and now included recitation of the whole psalter (all of the psalms) over a given period. The Liturgy of the Hours as we have come to know it took formal shape through the development of monastic rules, or formal guidelines, for monks living together in community, among which the *Rule* of Saint Benedict became most prominent. With the development and spread of Benedictine monasteries and subsequent religious orders, the full Liturgy of the Hours became firmly established and widely accepted in the western Church.

The evolution of the Divine Office, especially in its structuring by the distribution of the Hours throughout the day, is a direct response to the commandment of our Lord to pray always and continuously (see Luke 18:1 ff.). “Seven times a day I praise you ... ,” found in Psalm 119, verse 164, and specifically referenced in the *Rule* of Saint Benedict (*RB* 16: 1-3), inspired the development of the overall structure of the Liturgy of the Hours, which traditionally has had about seven components, or “Hours,”

spread over the course of the day, in addition to the Hour of Vigils, which was prayed during the night or very early in the morning.

By the time of the late Middle Ages, the “Hours” of the Liturgy of the Hours were generally as follows, with some variations among communities:

Matins, or Vigils – about 2:30 a.m. or 3:00 a.m.
Lauds, or Morning Prayer – about 5:30 a.m. (near dawn)
Prime – at 7:30 a.m.
Terce – at 9:00 a.m.
Sext – usually at noon
None – between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m.
Vespers, or Evening Prayer – about 4:30 p.m. (near sunset)
Compline – about 6:00 p.m. (one hour before bedtime)

The Divine Office continued to evolve and was modified by the Church over succeeding centuries. Some of the changes resulted in some confusion and laxity insofar as the Office was seen merely as a legalistic requirement or as a burden. According to Vatican II, the goal for the Office has been that “... the traditional sequence of the Hours is to be restored so that as far as possible they may once again be genuinely related to the time of day at which they are prayed” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 88; Abbot, *Documents*, 164, as cited in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd edition). Lauds (Morning Prayer) and Vespers (Evening Prayer) are emphasized as the two main Hours, around which the rest of the Office is organized, as they historically have been. As A.-M. Roguet quotes in *The Liturgy of the Hours: The General Instruction and Commentary*, “ ‘By venerable tradition of the universal Church, Lauds as morning prayer and Vespers as evening prayer are the two hinges upon which the daily Office turns; hence they are to be considered as the chief Hours and are to be celebrated as such’ ” (p. 29).

Monks at Saint Vincent Archabbey today pray Morning Prayer, Midday Prayer, and Evening Prayer in community, with some monks also praying Compline individually. Fully cloistered communities such as Trappist monasteries typically adhere to a

schedule like the following, with some variations among houses and for different days of the week and different liturgical seasons:

Vigils – about 2:30 a.m. or 3:00 a.m.
Lauds, or Morning Prayer – about 6:00 a.m.
Terce – about 9:45 a.m.
Sext – about 11:30 a.m.
Vespers, or Evening Prayer – about 4:30 p.m. or 5:00 p.m.
Compline - about 6:45 p.m.

3. What are the structure and content of the “Hours”?

First, it is important to remember that the two major Hours of the Divine Office are Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. Second, one should recall that the basic format for each of the Hours is as follows (and in this sequence): an opening verse, a hymn, the psalmody (sung or recited), a shorter or longer reading from Scripture, and concluding prayers. Finally, Compline, or Night Prayer, is often prayed at Oblate meetings in Latrobe and thus is familiar to many. Therefore, reference to these three Hours may be a good way to present the structure and content of the Hours of the Divine Office. The descriptions that follow are given according to the Roman Breviary.

General Introduction for Morning, Evening, & Night Prayer

- **Morning Prayer** (unless preceded by Vigils) begins with what is called the invitatory: “Lord, open my lips. And my mouth will proclaim your praise.”
- What is called the invitatory psalm – usually Psalm 95, or Psalm 100, 67, or 24 as an alternative – is then recited with its antiphon, which is said only at the beginning and end of the psalm when praying individually. The proper antiphon to use is found by going to the Ordinary and finding the correct week of the four-week cycle and the day.
- The “Glory to the Father” concludes the invitatory psalm.

- **Evening Prayer** and **Night Prayer** begin with this verse: “O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me,” followed by the Glory to the Father, which ends with an “Alleluia” (except during Lent).

Morning and Evening Prayer

- To begin both, see the Introduction as shown above for the Hour.
- Next do a hymn – taken from the psalter (the four-week cycle for Ordinary Time) or from what is called the “Proper of the Seasons” for a specific season (e.g., Advent) or solemnity or feast. Selections of appropriate hymns are found in the back of most breviaries and are organized accordingly for the seasons, solemnities, etc. The hymn can be sung or recited when one prays individually.
- **For Morning Prayer** – Next the following are to be recited in this order: psalm, Old Testament canticle, psalm, with their respective antiphons. These will be found in the breviary by going to the Ordinary and finding the correct week of the four-week cycle and day, and, if necessary, then to the Proper of Seasons for the appropriate season or solemnity or feast of the Liturgical Year.
- **For Evening Prayer** – Next the following are to be recited in this order: two psalms and New Testament canticle, with their respective antiphons. These, too, will be found in the breviary by going to the Ordinary and finding the correct week of the four-week cycle and day, and, if necessary, then to the Proper of Seasons for the appropriate season or solemnity or feast of the Liturgical Year.
- Next, for both, do a reading, found in the Ordinary/Proper of Seasons as above.

- Next, for both, do the responsory associated with the reading, found in the Ordinary/Proper of Seasons as above.
- **For Morning Prayer** – Next comes the Canticle of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79), or “Benedictus,” which is often found printed inside the front cover or thereabouts in a breviary (or sometimes on a separate card).
- **For Evening Prayer** – Next comes the Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:46-55), or “Magnificat,” which is often found printed inside the back cover or thereabouts in a breviary (or sometimes on a separate card).
- Next, for both, come the intercessions, which are found in the Ordinary/Proper of Seasons as above. It is, of course, appropriate to add personal intentions.
- Next, for both, is the concluding prayer, found in the Ordinary/Proper of Seasons as above.

Each Hour concludes with “May the Lord bless us, protect us from all evil and bring us to everlasting life,” which is found in the Ordinary and always used for both Hours when one prays the Office individually. (If a priest or deacon is presiding, he blesses and dismisses the people.)

Night Prayer

- To begin, say the introduction, as shown above for the Hour.
- Next, do a brief personal examination of conscience – focused and candid, but with no set format; the Penitential Rite from the Mass is used by many.
- Next, do a hymn – selected appropriately, as shown for Morning and Evening Prayer above.
- Next, do the psalmody – found in the breviary for the correct day of the week under the section for

“Night Prayer.” (Breviaries generally have only a one-week cycle of Night Prayer.)

- Next, do a reading – found in the breviary as above for the psalmody.
- Then recite the Gospel Canticle (of Simeon [Luke 2:29-32], or “Nunc Dimittis”)– found in the breviary as above for the psalmody and reading.
- Recite the closing prayer from the psalter – found in the breviary as above.
- Say the concluding verse – “May the all-powerful Lord grant us a restful night and a peaceful death.” This is found in the breviary as above.
- Sing (if possible) the antiphon of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These “Marian antiphons” are generally found in the breviary at the end of the section “Night Prayer” and are chosen in accordance with the season.

One will note in the “Night Prayer” section of the breviary that variations will be indicated throughout the Hour for specific liturgical seasons, and these should be followed accordingly.

4. What is a breviary?

A breviary is simply a very special book with one very special purpose - prayer. A breviary contains parts or all of the Liturgy of the Hours, or the Divine Office, and is issued in the form of one volume or of several volumes. Many breviaries come as one volume for ease of use and focus upon selected portions of the Divine Office, e.g., a four-week cycle of Morning and Evening Prayer and perhaps Night Prayer and selections from Daytime Prayer, solemnities and feasts, and so forth. There is a good selection of breviaries available nowadays from a variety of publishers, ranging from condensed versions in small portable books to complete compilations of the Liturgy of the Hours in multiple-volume sets.

The word “breviary” comes from the same word as “brief.” The term itself means a brief compendium, in this case of the Liturgy of the Hours as celebrated in a communal setting. Breviaries were originally devised for clergy and religious who because of travel or ministries were not able to pray the Liturgy of the Hours in community. The compact form of the Office in a “brief” book made it possible for the person to carry the prayers of the Hours with him.

5. Is there a particular breviary that might be suggested for a layperson just beginning to pray the Divine Office?

A list of breviaries with concise descriptions and their publishers, from simpler versions to the more complex, can be found in one of the appendices of the Saint Vincent Archabbey *Oblate Formation Booklet* (revised edition). One popular breviary seen in many parishes and used by many Oblates is the one-volume edition of *Christian Prayer: The Liturgy of the Hours*, published by Catholic Book Publishing Co., which is also available in large-print format. A compact version of this breviary that Oblates often find convenient, namely *Shorter Christian Prayer*, is also available from the same publisher. Either breviary is quite comprehensive for its size, containing the four-week cycle of psalms for Morning and Evening Prayer, a one-week cycle for Night Prayer, an Office for the Dead, and sections for seasons of the Church calendar, solemnities, and various saints. This shortened breviary is moderately priced and is small enough in size to fit into most purses or into a briefcase.

These are only suggestions. It is recommended that a person check several different breviaries carefully, consult with others who are praying the Divine Office for their recommendations, and then choose one which he likes and with which he feels most comfortable.

6. What are the “Ordinary,” the “Four Week Psalter,” the “Proper of Seasons,” and the “Proper of Saints” in a breviary?

The critical section called the “Ordinary” in a breviary of the Divine Office explains the basic structure and essential content for the Liturgy of the Hours throughout the Church year, starting with Ordinary Time and then moving through all of the Church seasons, as well as solemnities and feasts. The Ordinary contains the basic general components for Morning and Evening Prayer, including the appropriate antiphons to use with the invitatory (or opening psalm for the day) and with the psalms of the specific Hours. It is by using the Ordinary that a person gets started with praying the Divine Office or becomes located, so to speak, and then proceeds to “find one’s way” into it.

The psalter in most versions of the Liturgy of the Hours is divided into a four-week cycle for praying the psalms, which is then repeated and from which flows the essential framework and core content of the entire Liturgy for a complete year. Most breviaries will indicate in some specific fashion which week of the four-week cycle to begin either when starting a liturgical season, such as Advent or Lent, or when ending a liturgical season like Easter, such as on the Monday after Pentecost. The psalter organized in such a way that Weeks I and III have many similarities in terms of antiphons and choices of psalms, etc., and so do Weeks II and IV.

The Proper of Seasons is that portion of the breviary devoted to the special seasons and solemnities and feasts of the Church Liturgical Year. It contains or references the appropriate contents (antiphons, psalms, readings, responses, intercessions) for the specific Hours in keeping with the liturgical season, solemnity, feast, or memorial. It also includes major feasts of the Lord in Ordinary Time and covers Sundays 1-34 in Ordinary Time plus the last Sunday in Ordinary Time, Christ the King. The Proper of Seasons is generally organized as follows:

Advent Season	Feasts of the Lord (Ordinary Time)
Christmas Season	Ordinary Time
Lenten Season	
Sacred Triduum	
Easter Season	

Most breviaries also include a Proper of Saints as a distinct section which contains appropriate selections, e.g., antiphons, prayers, etc., for the solemnities (and sometimes feasts) of the Church Liturgical Year, such as the Annunciation, the Solemnity of the Apostles Peter and Paul, the Transfiguration, All Saints Day, and the other various feasts and commemorations of Mary, the apostles, the martyrs, and the saints given in the liturgical calendar. Larger breviaries also include selections for memorials and optional memorials on their proper dates. The individual may choose to refer to these or not to; especially in the beginning of one's acquaintance with the Divine Office, one may wish to stick to the Four-Week Psalter and/or the Proper of Seasons.

A very useful tool to have on hand as one begins to go through the Ordinary and pray the Divine Office is a twelve-month calendar, or "Ordo," such as those distributed by many parishes right before the Advent Season. Such calendars show the Church Liturgical Year and its important days and dates. Simple calendars such as these can help both beginners and seasoned veterans remain located and on track with the Ordinary when praying the Divine Office.

7. For those who find praying the Divine Office complicated, confusing, and a lot of work, how does one get started and not make a mess of it?

It would be highly misleading to suggest that praying the Divine Office is not an intimidating prospect for many people. It certainly can be, especially for beginners and even for those more familiar with it. Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion candidly faces the difficulties of praying the Office in his work *Christ, the Ideal of the Priest*: "There are some who complain at times that the breviary means nothing to them, and that the recitation of it, instead of being a support and a consolation, is for them a heavy burden. I recognize the element of trouble which the daily application to the canonical Hours involves. Nevertheless, you may be quite sure that ... you will discover to what extent your ... life can be super-naturalized by the worthy recitation of the breviary" (p. 225). Simply put, praying the Liturgy of the Hours requires some discipline and careful attention.

One of the most difficult problems for people wanting to pray the Divine Office is their understandable but frequently dangerous desire to "do it right." This need to pray the Office in exactly the right way can be of particular concern for eager people who are new to it and perhaps a bit perfectionistic; but such a desire can quickly become an obsession that is deadly. Persons become so needlessly worried about praying the Office "just right" that their anxiety soon inhibits them from fully incorporating the Office into their prayer lives and can even lead them to abandon the Office altogether. The truth is that even those who are experienced veterans at praying the Divine Office do not do it exactly "right" all the time. They may find themselves at times reciting psalms in the wrong week of the four-week cycle, or saying the wrong antiphon to the invitatory (opening psalm) for a particular day, or even forgetting to recite the Gospel canticle for Morning or Evening Prayer. These things happen because no one is perfect. It is giving one's full attention to the content of the Office that really matters. Blessed Abbot Marmion stresses this for praying the Office in

Christ, the Ideal of the Priest: “Attention to the sense of the words, and especially to God, makes the prayer perfect” (p. 232).

A second persistent problem with praying the Divine Office is the temptation to “play catch-up” when one has fallen behind with the Office or when one is pressed for time. Here, it **IS** important to do one thing right; that is, to pray the Hours of the Divine Liturgy at their appropriate time of the day and also not to pray two of the Hours one right after the other, e.g., Evening Prayer immediately followed by Compline. Otherwise, the intrinsic value and intent of the Hours are lost. Earlier it has been said that a major goal of Vatican II was to indicate that the Hours of the Office be prayed at their appropriate times over the course of the day. Meeting this goal with the respective Hours **IS** one thing that must always be done properly when praying the Office.

A third and chronic mistake made when one prays the Divine Office is what might be described as jumping immediately into it without proper preparation and attention before doing so. Blessed Abbot Marmion candidly discusses the need for proper preparation and getting oneself focused before the praying the Office in *Christ, the Ideal of the Priest*: “Before reading the breviary it is a good thing to prepare our hearts to read it well. The first and the most important point in this preparation is to spend a few moments in recollection. One cannot insist too much on this point. It is of capital importance However, here is what happens to us often enough: after having been busy with distracting or absorbing affairs, forthwith, without a moment’s recollection, without asking God for grace, we take up the breviary and begin the recitation of the Office straightaway. We satisfy the strict canonical obligation, but [our] prayer will be gone through without unction and will bear little fruit” (pp. 228-229). Here is an instance where doing the Office “just right” but doing it in a hurry can be “doing it wrong.”

Knowing some of the pitfalls, a person really has no reason to worry seriously about possibly being in the wrong place, making mistakes, or “doing it wrong.” As one senior monk once told an

enthusiastic but highly exasperated Oblate novice who was frustrated with trying to pray the Divine Office, “Just do it, and do it consistently, always conscientiously, and, most importantly, always prayerfully and reverently. You will quickly find over time through God’s grace that things will fall into place, and that you will become familiar with the flow of Divine Office over the four-week cycle and with moving around the breviary in conjunction with the Liturgical Year for its special seasons, solemnities, and feasts. But this will not happen unless and until you just do it.”

The consequences of “just doing it” are not trivial but profound. Mayeul de Dreuille expresses this with clarity as he discusses prayer for Benedictines in *The Rule of Saint Benedict: A Commentary in Light of World Ascetic Traditions*: “We have seen how, from the very beginning of the Rule, Saint Benedict wishes to guide the monk according to Scripture, asking him, as he did in the first step of humility, to stay in God’s presence. RB, following the tradition of the Fathers, considers psalmody as the essential structure for *continuous prayer*, which will blossom into contemplation. Beginning with the external aspects of prayer, Saint Benedict leads his disciple towards a most profound union with God” (pp. 193-194).

Blessed Abbot Columba Marmion, in *Christ, the Ideal of the Priest*, describes the benefits of praying the Office as being assimilated into Jesus Christ. He says, “When we recite the Hours in communion with the whole Church, Christ, as head of the mystical body and centre of the communion of saints, takes up and unites all our praise in Himself How imperfect and deficient is our giving of glory! But Christ supplies for our weakness” (pp. 235-236).

In the final analysis, the Divine Office is prayer. The Australian Trappist Michael Casey, O.C.S.O., articulates what some of the realities of prayer are for us in *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer*:

Prayer is not controlled. We are the ones controlled, called upon to submit to a mysterious inward process, to be carried beyond ourselves without ever knowing clearly what carries us or where we are going.

This is why many people speak of prayer in terms of Christ praying in us, of the Spirit making intercession for us, or of the whole Church calling out to God with our voices. Prayer is an intensely personal act, yet it is not confined within individuality. Prayer is larger than any of us. It is less a question of bringing prayer into our hearts than of bringing our hearts into prayer; not drawing water from the sea to fill a bath, but being immersed in an immense ocean and becoming one with it . . .

Prayer cannot be measured on a scale of success or failure because it is God's work – and God always succeeds. When we believe we have failed at prayer, it is because we decided what shape our prayer should have, and are now frustrated that there is nothing we can do to implement our ambition. Prayer is nothing more or less than the interior action of the Trinity at the level of being. This we cannot control; we can only reverently submit.

(taken from Michael Casey, O.C.S.O., *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer*, pages 34-35, a Redemptorist publication)*

As the senior monk told the Oblate novice regarding the Divine Office, "Just do it."

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SOURCES:

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