

As you prepare for Lent, and consider different devotions, you may want to add parts of the Liturgy of The Hours. Fr. James will be including Matins on Wednesday mornings, as well as Vespers on Fridays on the Lenten Calendar for anyone to join. Following is a description of the Liturgy of the Hours for those who are wanting more information.

Liturgy of the Hours is an ancient tradition of the Church that observes specific times of prayer throughout the day using Psalms, Gospel passages, intercessory prayers, and antiphons. The prayers vary according to the date, time of prayer, liturgical season, and saint of the day. The sequence of prayers in the Liturgy of the Hours is rooted in the Psalms and comes from the monastic practice of praying through all of the Psalms as often as possible. The Liturgy of the Hours provides a way for us to pray without ceasing (see 1 Thessalonians 5:16) and offers a rhythm for the spiritual life.

The Liturgy of the Hours is considered a public prayer of the Church, second only to the Holy Mass. However, it is also a wonderful form of personal prayer because it helps us enter into contemplation and interior dialogue with God through the [texts of Scripture](#).

Is The Liturgy of the Hours Found In The Bible? Yes, the Liturgy of the Hours is indeed rooted in the traditions of [prayer found in Scripture](#). In the Old Testament, priests from the line of Aaron offered a morning and evening sacrifice to God according to the Law. While they were in exile, without a Temple in which to make these offerings, the Jewish people prayed Psalms, hymns, and Scripture readings throughout their day. Once the Temple was rebuilt, they resumed their sacrifices but also continued praying in the mornings, evenings, and at the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day.

Jesus also prayed throughout the day, frequently rising early to do so: “In the morning, a great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35). The Acts of the Apostles mentions that the disciples and first Christians continued praying at the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day (see Acts 10:3, 9). Although they still went to the Temple to pray at these times, they no longer participated in the ritual sacrifices, as they now had the Eucharist (“the breaking of the bread”) as their new form of sacrifice to God.

How Many Times of Prayer Are In The Liturgy of the Hours? The [Liturgy of the Hours](#), as we know it now, is most especially rooted in the monastic tradition. The Rule of St. Benedict, written in the sixth century by the saint himself, is the earliest time that we hear about all of the canonical hours. There are seven times of prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, just like a verse in the psalms says, “Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances” (Psalm 119:164).

Initially, monks tried to pray all the Psalms in one day, but this became overwhelming. They soon decided to spread them out over the course of a week. Most recently (following the Second Vatican Council), the Psalter in the breviary became a four-week cycle. Although it has been revised a few times, the Liturgy of the Hours has maintained a fairly constant structure for more than a thousand years.

The Different Names for the Liturgy of the Hours You might hear these terms related to the Liturgy of the Hours:

- **Liturgy of the Hours:** A “liturgy” is a communal act of worship that the people make to God. The word comes from an ancient Greek term leitourgia, which means work or service for the people. As the USCCB [explains](#), the Liturgy of the Hours marks the hours of each day and sanctifies the day with prayer.
- **Divine Office:** The Liturgy of the Hours is sometimes called the Divine Office or “Work of God” (in Latin, opus Dei). By praying the Liturgy of the Hours, we give God the worship that he should receive from us, and we consecrate all that we do to him.
- **Breviary:** This word more properly refers to the prayer book that contains all the prayers and texts of the canonical hours.

When To Pray The Liturgy of the Hours, The Seven Prayer Times of the Liturgy of the Hours

Major Hours: These are the anchors of daily prayer. They are longer, richer offices that mark the heart of the day.

- **Office of Readings (*Matins*):** Traditionally prayed in the middle of the night or early morning.
- **Morning Prayer (*Lauds*):** Prayed at dawn to begin the day.
- **Evening Prayer (*Vespers*):** Prayed as evening approaches.

Minor Hours (or Little Hours): Shorter prayers that sanctify different points of the day.

- **Midmorning Prayer (*Terce*):** Around 9 a.m.
- **Midday Prayer (*Sext*):** Around noon.
- **Midafternoon Prayer (*None*):** Around 3 p.m.
- **Night Prayer (*Compline*):** Prayed just before going to sleep.

Which Hours Most Lay Catholics Pray: Today, most lay Catholics pray one or a few of the following five main hours:

- Office of Readings
- Morning Prayer (*Lauds*)
- Daytime Prayer (choose *Terce*, *Sext*, or *None* based on the time of day)
- Evening Prayer (*Vespers*)
- Night Prayer (*Compline*)

An Invitatory Psalm begins the liturgical day and is prayed right before the first hour of the day (either the Office of Readings or Morning Prayer). It is a psalm with antiphons that invites us to prayer.

The prayers for the minor hours of the Divine Office are much simpler and more compact than the major hours. *Terce*, *Sext*, and *None* are Latin for the third, sixth, and ninth hours of the day (beginning at six a.m.). There also used to be one more hour, prime, which was prayed at the “first hour” of the day, following *Lauds*, around six a.m. The Rule of St. Benedict includes *prime*, for eight hours total.

What's The Layout of the Liturgy of the Hours? General Structure of Liturgy of the Hours

Each portion of the Liturgy of the Hours follows roughly the same format, although the particular prayers and texts will vary from day to day.

- Each begins with the invocation “O God, come to my assistance” / “O Lord, make haste to help me.”
- A hymn is sung.
- The Psalmody portion consists of 1–3 psalms, each followed by the [Glory Be](#) (Doxology).
- An antiphon, usually a short Scripture verse, comes before and after each psalm reading.
- A brief [Scripture](#) reading and a responsory drawn from Scripture come next.
- Most hours of prayer also include a canticle, especially the main canticles in the New Testament: Zechariah’s Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79, used during Morning Prayer), Mary’s [Magnificat](#) (Luke 1:46-55, used during Evening Prayer), and Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29, used during Night Prayer). The other hours may feature another canticle from the Old or New Testament. The [Te Deum](#) concludes the Office of Readings.
- Intercessions request specific favors and graces from the Lord.

- A concluding prayer, which asks for God the Father's blessing upon us.
- A Marian antiphon follows Night Prayer (*Compline*).

Other Highlights of the Liturgy of the Hours A few hours of the Divine Office have their own distinctive aspects:

- Spiritual writings are part of the Office of Readings. These are taken from the works of Church Fathers or saints (often the saint of the day).
- A time of sacred silence is part of some of the hours to allow the person to enter more deeply into the Word of God and be open to the voice of the Holy Spirit.
- Night prayer includes an opportunity for us to make an examination of conscience – to briefly review the ways we have failed to love God and our neighbor throughout the past day, and to ask the Lord's forgiveness for these moments.

Main Themes in the Liturgy of the Hours: We can recognize a few main themes in the prayers and focuses of the Liturgy of the Hours.

- **Praise:** The hymns and psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours speak of glorifying God, and *Lauds*, the name for Morning Prayer, means "praise."
- **Thanksgiving:** In many of the prayers of the Liturgy of the Hours, but particularly in *Vespers* (Evening Prayer), we thank God for the day and for his gifts.
- **Consecration:** The Liturgy of the Hours consecrates each day to God.
- **Peace:** The repetition of antiphons and responsories of the Divine Office can soothe the soul.
- **Intercession:** The Liturgy of the Hours is filled with prayers that ask the Lord to grant us special graces and protection.
- **Continual prayer:** By praying several of the hours throughout the day, we learn to make our lives a continual prayer to God.

How Long Does It Take to Pray the Liturgy of the Hours? Praying the Liturgy of the Hours does not have to take long at all. Depending on which hours of the day you choose to pray and how many psalms are included in the prayers, it might take as little as ten minutes. The Office of Readings takes a bit longer because many psalms are included, along with a passage written by a saint. The most commonly prayed hours are Morning Prayer (*Lauds*), Evening Prayer (*Vespers*), and Night Prayer (*Compline*).

Do I Have to Pray the Liturgy of the Hours at Exact Times? While religious orders in monasteries and convents have **exact, fixed times of prayer with the sound of a bell to summon them**, lay Catholics are given a little more flexibility for when to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. So, you can simply pray them close to the intended times. *Lauds* can be your Morning Prayer regardless of your wakeup time, *Vespers* is great in the evening, and *Compline* should be prayed before you go to bed.

Why Should Lay Catholics Pray the Liturgy of the Hours? The Church strongly encourages lay persons to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, but there is no obligation on which ones to pray or how often. Priests are required to pray the entire Divine Office every day, while deacons only need to pray morning and evening prayers. According to [the Second Vatican Council](#), it is particularly meaningful for the faithful to pray the hours together with a priest.