

Some months ago several of our priests shared with me the problems they are having being faithful to the daily recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. Busy schedules and lack of quality time are factors, as well as the casual way some of our priests seem to approach the obligation. We discussed national reports which indicate that some priests have discontinued saying the Office completely. We are aware that some seminaries did not prepare their students adequately regarding the purpose and obligation of the daily celebration of the Hours.

This conversation led me to some prayerful reflections about the Liturgy of the Hours and some personal soul-searching about its role in my own life. On this special day for priests, as we celebrate the anniversary of our priesthood in Jesus by which we have become co-intercessors with him in the work of salvation, I would like to share with you some conclusions I have drawn about the role of the Liturgy of the Hours in our lives as priests.

The problem for some priests

For some of us, despite the obligation that is ours, the time constraints of trying to complete the entire Office each day is problematic. Either we are inclined to read the Psalms quickly without reflection, or we tend to skip various hours during the day. This can make the Office a burden for us rather than an opportunity for genuine prayer. We find it difficult to be caught up in the rhythm of prayer pulsating throughout the whole Church when we are rushing to fulfill an obligation. If the celebration of the Hours becomes rote for us, it is no longer an opportunity for personal prayer but only a burdensome task which is easily discarded. It is important in the long run that we establish a routine for praying the Office, but it must be a time of real prayer if we are going to be faithful day after day for a lifetime.

Most of us abhor boredom. When the repetitive nature of the Psalter begins to cause ennui (the feeling of being bored by something tedious) in us, we have to sense once again the rhythm of prayer pulsating in the Body of Christ, the Church. Our regular heart beat, our regular pattern of breathing, our regular schedule of eating and exercising - these regularities are the basis of our continued life and physical health. Irregularity in any of these activities signals problems. And it is the same for our spiritual lives as well. The regular patterns of prayer each day, especially the Divine Office for us priests, is the basis for our spiritual health. Irregularity signals problems.

It is not repetition which causes boredom for us, but only repetition disconnected from its purpose and end.

Recapturing a Spirit of Prayer

What I have discovered over the years, as I have gradually learned to take time to pray the Hours and not just read words, are the insights and inspirations which the Lord gives me each day. I have learned that the time I spend with the Office is more important than many other things I do during the day. When I find myself rushing through the Psalms and Canticles and readings, I deliberately slow down and savor what I am reading and praying. I may not complete as much of the Office as I intended at any one time, but it has been a fruitful period of prayer for me, and for the whole Church that I joined in this universal liturgy.

The Psalms constitute the major portion of the Hours. They are the actual prayers of the psalmist to God which we make our own. Jesus did the same thing every day as a devout Jew. No matter how involved he was in his public ministry, and despite the urgency of trying to accomplish so much in such a short time, Jesus made time every day to pray alone and to pray the Liturgy of the Hours (the Psalms, Canticles and reading from the Old Testament) prescribed for observant Jews, both in the Temple and in the synagogues of his country. St Augustine reminds us that, in the Psalter, Jesus continues to sing and pray every day in us.

Morning and evening prayer are the two hinges on which the Liturgy of the Hours turns. The whole Church prays together to acknowledge the Creator and his mighty works every morning and evening. Together we recall the Incarnation of the Son and the salvation that is ours through him. As priests, we should want to take part in this prayer of the Church, just as we take part in her daily Eucharistic liturgy. The Liturgy of the Hours and the celebration of the Eucharist are meant to be anchors for our lives of faith and prayer as priests.

When we read and reflect on the Office of Readings each day; we open ourselves to a cycle of Scripture readings for the year; we are able to be enlightened and inspired by the Fathers of the Church and other sacred writers; and we are reminded of the teachings of Vatican II and the other councils of the Church in our long tradition. These readings become for us, rather than just an obligation, a chance to fulfill our own need to be grounded in God's revelation to us through the lived experience of the Church (Tradition) and our written tradition in the Scriptures.

The obligation of priests to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours daily

The obligation for priests to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours daily is clear in official Church documents which I will list below. Our response to this obligation depends on our understanding and acceptance of magisterial authority versus our own authority and the level of our solidarity with the Church and her Tradition.

The concept of obligation, especially when it binds us morally, receives mixed reactions today. Some negativity is baggage from the past when every infraction was considered seriously sinful, and some is the result of modern self-determination.

Most of us have heard pre-Vatican stories about priests who were so concerned about the "obligation" of saying the full Office each day that they would pull off the road at 11:45 PM to finish it before midnight with the aid of their cars' headlights. If this really happened, it was a caricature of what the Church demanded of her priests at that time. But the stories do show the importance of the Opus Dei (the work of God) to which nothing else should be preferred.

In these post-Vatican II days, on the other hand, some priests reject the notion of obligation being attached to the Office. Prayer should be voluntary to be fruitful, they maintain, not forced on them under pain of sin. Granted that people ought to do things because they want to do them or because they like to do them, but many things in life are not wanted or liked but still they have to be done. A mother awakened from sound sleep by the cries of her baby may not want to get out of her warm bed in the middle of a cold night but she does so because of her love for her baby. Love always makes obligation bearable and even rewarding.

In our role as co-intercessors with Christ on behalf of his people, we priests have accepted the obligation to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours daily. The Church holds us to this obligation out of love for us and for the people we serve.

Official Church documents regarding the Office

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum concilium*) states, in n. 96, that clerics in major orders, but not bound to office in choir, "are bound to pray the entire Office every day, either in common or individually..."

The Liturgy of the Hours is not private or individual prayer. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy nn. 84-85 states: "it is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father (n. 85). Hence all who take part in the Divine Office are not only performing a duty for the Church, they are also sharing in what is the greatest honor for Christ's Bride; for by offering these praises to God they are standing before God's throne in the name of the Church, their mother".

The General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours, n. 28, points out that: "The Liturgy of the Hours is entrusted to sacred ministers in a special way so that it is to be recited by each of them - with the necessary adaptations - even when the people are not present. The Church deposes them to say the Liturgy of the Hours in order that at least through them the duty of the whole community may be constantly and continuously fulfilled and the prayer of Christ may persevere unceasingly in the Church".

The General Instruction, n. 20, reminds us: "The Liturgy of the Hours, like the other liturgical services, is not a private function, but pertains to the whole body of the Church. It manifests the Church and has an effect upon it. Its ecclesial celebration is best seen and especially recommended when it is performed... by the local Church".

The Liturgy of the Hours has an express purpose in the life of the Church. The General Instruction, n. 11 states: "Compared with other liturgical actions, the particular characteristic which ancient tradition has attached to the Liturgy of the Hours is that it should consecrate the course of day and night".

The Liturgy of the Hours has a proper relationship to the Eucharist. The General Instruction, n. 12, teaches us: "The Liturgy of the Hours extends to the different hours of the day the praise and prayer, the memorial of the mysteries of salvation and the foretaste of heavenly glory, which are offered us in the Eucharistic mystery, 'the centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community'".

The Liturgy of the Hours shapes and forms those who pray it into the People of God. Again, The General Instruction notes in n. 14: "The sanctification of man and the worship of God are achieved in the Liturgy of the Hours by the setting up of a dialogue between God and man... The saving Word of God has great importance in the Liturgy of the Hours, and may be of enormous spiritual benefit for those taking part". In n. 18: "Whoever participates in the Liturgy of the Hours makes the Lord's people grow by imparting to them a hidden apostolic fruitfulness", and in n. 19: "Those taking part in this prayer should make it their own so that it becomes a source of devotion, abundant grace and nourishment for personal prayer and apostolic activity. In praying it worthily, attentively and with devotion, they must attune their minds to their voices".

In n. 29 we read: "Bishops and priests, therefore, and other sacred ministers, who have received from the Church the mandate to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours, are to recite the whole sequence of Hours each day, preserving as far as possible the genuine relationship of the Hours to the time of day. They are to give due importance to the Hours which are the two hinges on which this Liturgy turns, that is, Lauds as morning prayer and Vespers; let them take care not to omit these hours, unless for a serious reason. They are also to carry out faithfully the Office of Readings, which is above all the liturgical celebration of the Word of God. Thus, they will carry out daily that duty of welcoming into themselves the Word of God. That the day may be completely sanctified, they will desire to recite the middle Hour and Compline, thus commending themselves to God and completing the entire *Opus Dei* before going to bed".

The 1983 Code of Canon Law, in canon 276, §2 spells out various means by which the cleric pursues holiness. In sub-point 3, the canon notes that "priests as well as deacons aspiring to the priesthood are obliged to fulfill the Liturgy of the Hours daily in accordance with the proper and approved liturgical books". This wording is declarative, obligatory.

Conclusion

The Church expects all of us priests to pray the Liturgy of the Hours every day (except for serious reasons which prevent us from doing so) in order to strengthen our solidarity with the whole Church and to pray for the needs of the Church everywhere and in our own Archdiocese. The prayer of the Church and our own contemplative prayer each day help us stay focused spiritually.

When we pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily, we are nourished by the same spiritual fare as all the other priests throughout the world who are praying with us. This strengthens the bonds of fraternal communion and our solidarity as priests.

I encourage you to pray the Hours with fellow priests as often as you can, to reinforce your commitment to the Divine Office, and to share together the message the Lord is directing to you through this sacred liturgy.

If you are struggling with the daily recitation of the Office, or say it only intermittently, or have given up on it, I hope this letter will encourage you to address the issue with your confessor or spiritual director. I am willing to discuss this matter with you personally and work out a process with you to help you gradually make the Liturgy of the Hours an opportunity of genuine prayer in your life.

I think our daily participation in the Liturgy of the Hours can become a source of encouragement and consolation for us if we take the time to reflect on what we read, and to pray in union with the whole Church. It is not so difficult to be faithful to this sacred burden every day when we come to realize that we bear it with the Lord for his people. This gift of fidelity will be my prayer for you this Holy Thursday as we renew once again our identification with the priesthood of Christ and to our commitment to be co-intercessors with him in the work of salvation.

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Taken from *L'Osservatore Romano*
Weekly Edition in English
5 August 1998, p. 6