

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

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I want to thank Amy, for her amazing presentation on describing the Liturgy of the Hours, our Carmelite obligation, and practical pointers on how to recite it and teach it to others. I would now like to complement what she has already presented, focusing on four points, the inherent power of this prayer, its transformative nature, its essential foundation for all Carmelite Prayer, and some helpful thoughts to improve our recitation. The point being is that one cannot expect to grow or advance in the spiritual life by taking a minimalist approach to the Liturgy of the Hours.

Power of this Prayer:

To understand and appreciate the power of this prayer, which is well recognized for its power over evil, let us review the source and history of the psalms. The root of this prayer goes all the way back to Jewish practices thousands of years ago. About 1230 B.C., Moses began morning and evening sacrifices in the desert before the Arc of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence among His people. Then about, 1000 B.C., King David wrote several Psalms as sacred poetry which were sung chorally before the Arc at dawn and at sunset, the beginning and the close of each day. Although authored by David, it is important to remember that the Psalms, like all of Scripture, are divinely inspired.

David is the Christ of God, anointed as king of God's people, and is confirmed in the Holy Spirit. We all know the story, David is chosen by God because he is pure of heart, "*...the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.* At David's anointing, "*... the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. (1Sam 16:10-13)* This is important, as the Christ, David had God's protection and favor and was given an awesome power over the creatures of the earth. He had wrestled a mighty bear, and a lion, the king of beasts, and was triumphant. In book 1 Samuel, David recounts, "*Your servant has killed both a lion and a bear.*" (1Sam 17:36) He

continues, *“The same LORD who delivered me from the claws of the lion and the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”* (1Sam 17:37) With this confidence a youth, a shepherd, with neither armor nor sword, was not afraid to go against the mighty warrior giant, Goliath! David approached Goliath empowered by the Spirit fully confident of the outcome. Through his victory he became a mighty warrior and chief military commander of all the armies of God.

David understood the real battle was not against bears and lions or even enemy giants. What happens in the physical world is merely the manifestation and extension of the spiritual world. It was under the guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit, that David composed the psalms, with the purpose of defeating evil. The scripture explains, *“And whenever the evil spirit was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand; so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.”* (1Sam 16: 23)

This amazing power of the psalms did not go unnoticed and gradually began to be prayed seven times a day as Amy mentioned and as the psalms themselves confirm, *“Seven times a day do I praise thee... (Ps. 119:164)* We find expressions like: *“At dusk, dawn, and noon I will grieve and complain, and my prayer will be heard.”* (Ps. 55:18).

This practice of reciting or chanting the psalms, and reading passages of the Old Testament at certain hours of the day and night continued down through the ages. It became the primary devotion prescribed for all observant Jews. Jesus prayed this early liturgy of the hours with Mary and Joseph in their home at Nazareth. Later He prayed with his disciples. Archbishop of Omaha, Elden Francis Curtiss explains,

“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, He made time every day to pray... the Liturgy of the Hours (the Psalms, Canticles and reading from the Old Testament) prescribed for observant Jews.”

The Gospels provide ample evidence of this, as they record him quoting from the psalms and Hebrew Scriptures. Even at His death upon the cross, he recites from psalm 22 in the manner that a rabbi would recite the first line of a particular Psalm as instruction for his listeners.

After Jesus death and resurrection, he continues to live in, and work through his followers, accomplishing His original mission, glorifying the Father with the salvation of souls. In the Liturgy of the Hours, Jesus is now praying through His body the Church in the same manner that He prayed in His mortal body. It is not just us that pray, but we lend our bodies and voices to the service of Christ, that He may pray through us and with us, every day, offering love and praise to the Father. This fact is evidenced in the early church, *“About midnight, ...Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God...”* (Acts, 16:25) It is recounted that, *“Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray at about noontime.”* (Acts, 10:9) Even devout non-Jews were given to this form of prayer as the scriptures relate regarding the centurion Cornelius, *“One afternoon about three o’clock, ...an angel of God came to him saying... your prayers ...have ascended as a memorial offering before God.”* (Acts, 10:3).

From those early centuries, Christians have strived to offer their lives in prayer. They included readings of the Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and canticles. This tradition continued to develop gradually, and achieved what was to become its definitive form by the mid-6th century, when it was incorporated into the rule of St. Benedict.

Like David, his forefather, who played and sang the psalms to drive the evil out from Saul, we the body of Christ, are called to pray the Liturgy of the Hours to cast the evil out from the world. This is the sublime nature and dignity of the OCDS vocation to counter-balance, through prayer, the effect of evil in the world. Attached to it is the awesome responsibility that when we grow slack in prayer Jesus’ voice, and intercession before His Fathers Face, grows fainter.

Transformative nature of this prayer:

The Liturgy of the Hours is the chief means for achieving mindfulness of God and transformation in Christ. It is not a private or individual prayer, as the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy states, *“it is the very prayer which Christ himself together with his Body addresses to the Father.”* (no 85) As Jesus lives in us, praying to His Father through us, we also live in Him and are transformed in Him. The Liturgy of the Hours shapes and forms those who pray it into the body of Christ, the Church. His Eminence, Cardinal Francis Joseph Spellman, Archbishop of New York writes,

“The world has urgent need of the spirit, both of penance and prayer, which the Breviary, when properly used, abundantly supplies. Any earnest soul who looks about for helps in his life of prayer and in his practice of penance, need look no further. The Breviary, which is the official prayer-book of the Church, brings great graces: such as the grace to know the mind of the Church, the grace to live the life of the Church, the grace to share in the mission of the Church. In a word, more than any other book, the Breviary reveals the inner spirit of the Church and, what is just as important; it attracts the soul to intimate union with Her, possessing with Her “one heart and one spirit.”

As leaders in our groups and communities, we should be well versed with the “General Instruction” of the Liturgy of the Hours, which supports the understanding that the Liturgy of the Hours shapes and forms those who pray it into the People of God. In the General Instruction notes, number 14 we read that, *“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, and may be of enormous spiritual benefit for those taking part.”* In note 18 we read, *“Whoever participates in this prayer makes the Lord's people grow by imparting to them a hidden apostolic fruitfulness”,* and in note 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.”*

We all understand how we are nourished by Mass and the Sacraments – especially the Eucharist. As our spiritual food, the Eucharist allows us to participate in the enigma whereby we become that which we consume, rather than that which we consume becoming us. The Liturgy of the Hours has a proper relationship to the Eucharist. The General Instruction, number. 12, explains:

“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 center and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community.’ ”

The glorified Christ, Who “*dies no more*” (Rom. 6:9), is present in the Blessed Sacrament as a means of achieving an intimate and loving commingling of God with man. The liturgy of the Hours extends the effects of this commingling to the hours throughout the day. The effect is like the effect of food for our body. Food sustains our physical life, and the Liturgy of the Hours sustains the life of the soul. Through this communion, Jesus offers man an intimate sharing in God’s own life, a life that is eternal. It is a participation in the intimate communion that exists between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Essential foundation for all Carmelite prayer:

The Liturgy in the life of an OCDS provides the foundation of all Carmelite prayer. That is why we strive to celebrate each hour as close to its proper time as we are able. In this manner we consecrate to God the cycle of night and day, the liturgical seasons, and the whole gamut of human activity. Our prayer becomes a way of life where, our delight becomes the law of the LORD, meditating on it day and night. (Ref. Ps 1:2). Carmelite prayer recognizes four natural progressions in our life of prayer which are briefly as follows:

Christian prayer begins by receiving God’s Word. This is the foundation of all Christian prayer and occurs through various forms; spiritual reading, rote prayer, and participating in the liturgy

in all its forms. At Mass we receive the Word of God in the scriptures we read and the Eucharist we receive. The liturgical celebration is extended throughout the day by praying the Liturgy of the Hours. If we use the analogy of a meal, for our spiritual nourishment this would correspond to taking the food into our mouths. If that is as far as it went, we would die of starvation.

The next level is where we reflect on the Word and ponder it in our hearts. (cf Lk 2:19) Slowly reflecting on it and familiarizing ourselves with the mysteries and events of Jesus' life and the life of God's people. Again, in the analogy of a meal, this would be where we chew our food savoring what we have received and releasing the enzymes which make us able to assimilate it.

The next level is where we leave our thinking aside and simply let our hearts speak to God. We take from it what God intends for us at that particular moment. It is a general appreciation inspired by our reflections on God's Word, which according to St. Teresa, is an "*intimate conversation with the one we know loves us.*" In this aspect of the analogy, food is digested and broken down into small useable fragments without our knowing or being conscience of it.

The final level is where we let go not only of our own ideas, plans and meditations but also of our holy words and thoughts. We simply rest in the presence of God. This is what we refer to as "silent" prayer, embodying exterior and interior silence. It is a "loving gaze" at the one we know who loves us. We are present to Him at the deepest level of our being and are gradually transformed from within. His word in all its forms becomes part of us, inscribed in our mind and on our heart (cf Heb 8:10) In the analogy of a meal, this would be where the digested food is absorbed and used as energy or as the raw materials to repair and build new tissue, transforming us into the body of Christ.

Our Carmelite prayer always inhabits one of these four aspects in some form. At every Mass, with every rosary, every time we pray our breviary, we are reading or hearing God's word. It is then natural to reflect and meditate on what we have received. When we sit down for silent prayer, we draw from what we have

been meditating on and initiate an intimate conversation. Then, when the words run out, we rest in contemplation. These aspects of prayer need to be flexible. They are not fixed rules to adhere to, but simply the natural movement of how prayer develops towards greater simplicity and freedom; from the intellect and imagination to the desire of the will. Gradually the words of scripture begin to dissolve and become our Words, crying out the desire of our own heart, “Abba, Father!” (cf Gal 4:6)

Using the Word of God as the foundation of our prayer is the direction taught by our Holy Mother and may be easier to understand in her own words. In the sixth mansion chapter 7 she explains that, whether we understand it or not, we are always reflecting on the mysteries of Christ’s life that we read and pray in the Liturgy of the Hours,

“But I say that a person will not be right if he says he does not dwell on these mysteries or often have them in mind, especially when the Catholic Church celebrates them. Nor is it possible for the soul to forget that it has received so much from God, so many precious signs of love, for these are living sparks that will enkindle it more in its love for our Lord. But I say this person doesn’t understand himself, because the soul understands these mysteries in a more perfect manner. The intellect represents them in such a way, and they are so stamped on the memory, that the mere sight of the Lord fallen to the ground in the garden with that frightful sweat is enough to last the intellect not only an hour but many days, while it looks with a simple gaze at who He is.”

She also gives a lengthy discussion about contemplation and how it is an enkindling of the will, but is always tied to the intellect for that enkindling. She states earlier in the same chapter section 7, *“There are some souls... who brought by our Lord to perfect contemplation would like to be in that prayer always; but that is impossible ...for the will often needs the help of the intellect so as to be enkindled.”*

This is the prayer expressed and practiced by Saint Therese in her autobiography, “Story of a Soul”,

“Outside of the Divine office... I say simply to God what I wish to say, without composing beautiful sentences, and he

always understands me. For me, prayer is an aspiration of the heart, it is a simple glance directed to heaven, it is a cry of gratitude and love in the midst of trial as well as joy; finally, it is something great, supernatural, which expands my soul and unites me to Jesus.”

(Pg 242)

The liturgy of the Church provides the foundation for our formation and growth as we, “*meditate on the law of the Lord day and night.*” (Ps 1:2) Through it we are reading and meditating on scripture with the Mass, the Liturgy of the Hours, the liturgical year, our spiritual reading, and the events of our life. These all work together providing a foundation to keep us overflowing with prayer... and thirsting for more. When a certain event in the life of Christ touches us, it “*is enough to last the intellect not only an hour but many days*”. We perform our silent prayer continuing our meditation and “*intimate conversation with the One we know loves us.*” Then as the words run out we move naturally to recollection, “*a simple gaze at who He is*”.

Some helpful thoughts to improve our recitation:

Everybody, at one time or another, experiences difficulty being faithful to the daily recitation of the Liturgy of the Hours. Busy schedules and lack of quality time are certainly factors, as well as the casual way we may approach the obligation. Certainly the busy time constraints of everyday life, especially with a family, can affect the way we either read the Psalms quickly without reflection, or tend to skip one or more of the hours during a day. Occasionally this is not cause for concern. Origen, a father of the Church, (died c.254) taught that acts of righteousness and mercy were also prayer. He states,

“He prays without ceasing who combines his prayer with necessary works, and suitable activities, for his virtuous deeds or the commandments he has fulfilled are taken up as a part of his prayer.”

As a point of reference the Congregation for Divine Worship offers this guidance in relation to priests and deacons, “A serious

reason, be it of health, or of pastoral service in ministry, or of an act of charity, or of fatigue, ...may excuse the partial recitation and even the entire Divine Office." This is according to the general principle that an ecclesiastical law is not binding when a serious inconvenience is present. It makes the distinction that it must be a "serious" inconvenience, not just a simple inconvenience, or laziness, or performance of unnecessary activities just to divert your attention from the office. For example, I am going to watch the news and then I will pray my office. Then the news ends, and you say I am so tired I can't stay awake another minute.

It is important to recognize that for OCDS, unlike priests and deacons, the Liturgy of the Hours is not obligated under pain of sin. We notice this in our constitutions under section III "Witnesses to the Experience of God", paragraph 24, addressing the value of the sacramental and liturgical life, it doesn't say members will recite morning and evening prayer, but that "...members will "try" to recite...". It is the same with our promise. We don't promise to "achieve" evangelical perfection, only to "tend" towards it prompted by the Holy Spirit. It is what we aspire to – knowing that we will never fully attain perfection in this life. It is the sincerity of our desire to grow and to develop, that in God's view is more meaningful than its accomplishment.

So, in our role as co-intercessors with Christ on behalf of his people, we have freely made a promise to "tend" toward evangelical perfection and to "try" to celebrate the Liturgy of the Hours daily. God and the Order accept and hold us to this commitment out of love for us and for the people we serve. We should struggle to the best of our ability to keep it, even when inconvenient or not feeling in the mood for prayer. If we only prayed when "we felt like it", then we would hardly ever pray at all. Although it is important that we make the effort to get something out our prayer, it ought not to be judged by our own subjective feelings. Fr. Gabriel Barry, OCD adds, *"Far more important is the depth of conviction, the generosity, the trust, the faith, and steadfastness that goes beyond the self-centered prayer that seems only to be concerned with 'feeling good.'"* (The Prayer of the Church by Fr. Gabriel Barry, OCD pg 10)

When we are rushing to merely fulfill an obligation, it is difficult to be caught up in the rhythm of prayer that pulsates throughout the whole Body of Christ. It is when we habitually approach the Liturgy of the Hours in a rushed or somewhat obligated manner that it eventually takes its toll, and makes it seem more of a burden, than a cherished opportunity for genuine communion with God. When our celebration of the Hours becomes rote, it is no longer an opportunity for personal prayer but merely a burdensome task, which is easily discarded. To counter-act this tendency in my own prayer, I go into my room and shut the door so I can pray to my Father in secret. I sit on the floor in a meditative and comfortable position and pray aloud so I can hear the sacred text and involve more of my senses to reflect on it.

The time we spend with the Liturgy of the Hours is more important than many other things that we may do. So if we find ourselves rushing through the Psalms, Canticles, and readings, we should take a moment to make a conscious and deliberate effort to slow down. We need to remind ourselves that we are in the presence of God, and attempt to savor every morsel of the experience. When we make an effort to allow the time necessary to converse with the Lord and accept the insights and inspirations, which He chooses to give us, then the Liturgy of the Hours becomes a source of encouragement and consolation. Even if we are unable to complete as much of the Liturgy of the Hours as intended, if it is done in this manner it has been a more fruitful period of prayer for both us, and the Church.

If the repetitive nature of the Liturgy of the Hours causes a lack of enthusiasm and boredom regarding the task, we need to make a concerted effort to reclaim that initial love, fervor, and devotion for prayer that we once had. It should be noted that,

“it is not repetition, which causes boredom, but only repetition disconnected from its proper purpose and end. [Prayer], should be like our own regular heartbeat, 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. It is the same for our spiritual lives. The regular pattern

of prayer each, day is the basis for our spiritual health and our mission to the Church. Irregularity signals problems.”

To some degree prayer needs be voluntary to be fruitful, and the best situation is when we do things because we want to do them, or we like to do them. But it should also be recognized that many things in life are not always wanted or liked, but still they need to be done. A parent awakened from sound sleep by the cries of its baby may not want to get out of his or her warm bed in the middle of a cold night but, will do so because of love for its child. Similarly, our motivation should be our love for God. Love always makes obligations more bearable and even rewarding. As Saint Paul declares,

“If I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.” (1Cor. 13:2-3)

Our holy Mother, echoes this sentiment saying, *“It is love alone that gives worth to all things.”*

In summary, Fr. Anthony Morello, OCD, in his article, “Basic Identity of Secular Carmelites”, addresses one of the dispositions of a Carmelite vocation as a person who is *“habitually given to our kind of prayer”*. This makes perfect sense, based on the fact that it is the foundation of all our Carmelite prayer and thus our relationship with God. It is the catalyst that forms and transforms us into union with God. And it protects our vocation from being stolen away by the evil one. Therefore, it should be evident that one will not grow or advance in the spiritual life by taking a minimalist approach to the Liturgy of the Hours.

When we hold the Liturgy of the Hours in our hands let us remember and be inspired by the words of Saint Augustine,

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you! You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I plunged into the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. Created things kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not

have been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed your fragrance on me; I drew in breath and now I pant for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me, and I burned for your peace.”