EDUCATION

Guide For Liturgy Of The Hours

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582430101626

Understanding the Divine Office: A Practical Guide For Liturgy Of The Hours

The Liturgy of the Hours, also known as the Divine Office, is the daily prayer of the Church, sanctifying the passage of time through praise, intercession, and scripture. While it has historically been the domain of clergy and religious, the Second Vatican Council encouraged the faithful to embrace this rich tradition. For many, however, the prospect of beginning a prayer routine with the Breviary can feel daunting. This guide for Liturgy of the Hours is designed to demystify the practice, offering clear, practical advice for anyone seeking to integrate this ancient form of prayer into their daily life. Whether you are a complete beginner or looking to deepen your existing practice, this comprehensive resource will walk you through the essential hours, the required books, and the rhythm of praying with the Church.

What Is the Liturgy of the Hours?

Before diving into the practical steps of a guide for Liturgy of the Hours, it is important to understand what it actually is. At its core, the Liturgy of the Hours is the public prayer of the Church. It is composed primarily of the Psalms, interspersed with hymns, readings from Scripture, and intercessory prayers. The goal is to consecrate the entire day to God, from the early morning through the night. It is called the "Divine Office" because it is a duty (officium) performed for God, and it is called the "Liturgy of the Hours" because it marks the hours of the day. This prayer connects you not only to God but to the entire Body of Christ, as the Church around the world prays the same essential texts each day.

Essential Books and Resources for the Divine Office

One of the first questions in any guide for Liturgy of the Hours involves the materials needed. The traditional full version is contained in a four-volume set called the **Liturgy of the Hours**(also known as the Breviary). However, there are shorter, more accessible options for those starting out.

The Four-Volume Set

The standard edition is organized by the liturgical year:

- Volume I: Advent and Christmas
- Volume II: Lent and Easter
- Volume III: Ordinary Time (Weeks 1–17)
- Volume IV: Ordinary Time (Weeks 18–34)

This set is comprehensive and is the gold standard for a complete guide for Liturgy of the Hours. It includes all the readings, antiphons, and intercessions for every day of the year.

Shorter Christian Prayer

Christian Prayer (often called the one-volume edition) is a wonderful resource. It contains the morning, evening, and night prayers for the entire year. It is more portable and less intimidating than the four-volume set, making it an excellent choice for laypeople and busy professionals.

Digital and Online Options

There are also excellent digital resources. Apps like *iBreviary* and *Universalis* provide the full text of all the hours, often free of charge. These are particularly useful for travel or for those who prefer reading from a screen. While this guide for Liturgy of the Hours focuses on the physical books, digital tools can be a great supplement to your prayer life.

The Seven Traditional Hours: A Breakdown

The Liturgy of the Hours is traditionally divided into seven "hours" or prayer times. The Second Vatican Council simplified this structure for the laity, but understanding all the hours helps you grasp the full rhythm of the Office.

Morning Prayer (Lauds)

This is one of the two "hinge" hours, along with Evening Prayer. It is prayed at the beginning of the day, ideally at sunrise. The theme is praise and thanksgiving for the new day. It includes the Canticle of Zechariah (the Benedictus), which is a hymn of praise for the coming of Christ.

Daytime Prayer (Terce, Sext, None)

These are the three "little hours" traditionally prayed at mid-morning (9 AM), midday (noon), and mid-afternoon (3 PM). They are shorter than Morning and Evening Prayer and consist of a hymn, three psalms, a short reading, and a concluding prayer. For those following a practical guide for Liturgy of the Hours, these are often the first hours to be omitted if time is short.

Evening Prayer (Vespers)

This is the second "hinge" hour, prayed at sunset or in the early evening. It is a prayer of thanksgiving for the day that has passed and includes the Canticle of Mary (the Magnificat). For many, Evening Prayer is the most beloved hour, as it provides a moment of calm reflection at the end of a busy day.

Night Prayer (Compline)

This is the final hour of the day, prayed before retiring to bed. It is a short, simple service that includes an examination of conscience and the Canticle of Simeon (the Nunc Dimittis). It asks for God's protection during the night. A comprehensive guide for Liturgy of the Hours will always emphasize Night Prayer as the easiest hour for beginners to start with, as it is short and deeply comforting.

The Office of Readings

Formerly called Matins, this hour can be prayed at any time of day. It features three psalms and two extended readings: one from Scripture and one from the writings of a Church Father or saint. It is the most intellectually substantial of the hours.

How to Pray the Liturgy of the Hours: A Step-by-Step Guide

Now that you have your materials and understand the structure, let us walk through the actual practice. This section of our guide for Liturgy of the Hours will provide a clear, actionable method.

Step 1: Determine the Correct Day

The Liturgy of the Hours follows the liturgical calendar. If you are using a digital app, this is done automatically. If you are using a physical book, you will need to find the correct page or ribbon. Most Breviaries have a ribbon marker for the current week. Start by identifying the current liturgical season and week.

Step 2: Set Your Intention

Before you begin, pause for a moment. Make the Sign of the Cross and consciously offer your prayer to God. You might say a short prayer like, "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise." This sets the tone for a sacred encounter.

Step 3: The Invitatory

The very first prayer of the day, at the beginning of Morning Prayer or the Office of Readings, is the **Invitatory**. It begins with the verse, "Lord, open my lips." This is followed by Psalm 95 (or another Invitatory psalm) and an antiphon. This is the "doorway" to the entire day's prayer.

Step 4: Pray the Psalms

The heart of each hour is the praying of the Psalms. The Breviary provides a four-week cycle of the Psalms. Do not rush through them. Read them slowly, allowing them to become your own prayer. If a psalm feels difficult or violent, remember that the Church interprets all psalms through the lens of Christ. You can use the antiphon as a key to understanding the psalm.

Step 5: The Reading and Responsory

After the psalms, there is a short reading from Scripture. This is followed by a responsory, which is a short verse that helps you reflect on the reading. Take a moment of silence after the reading to let the word sink in.

Step 6: The Gospel Canticle

At Morning Prayer, this is the **Benedictus** (Luke 1:68-79). At Evening Prayer, it is the **Magnificat**(Luke 1:46-55). These are sung or recited with great reverence. The antiphons for these canticles change with the liturgical season and feast days, adding a beautiful richness to the prayer.

Step 7: Intercessions, Our Father, and Concluding Prayer

You then offer intercessions for the Church and the world, pray the Our Father, and hear the closing prayer of the hour. This is followed by a final blessing. This structure is consistent across all the major hours, making it easy to memorize after a short time with any good guide for Liturgy of the Hours.

Tips for Beginners: Starting Your Journey with the Divine Office

Starting a new prayer practice can be challenging. Here are some practical tips to help you persevere.

1. Start Small: Do not try to pray all seven hours on day one. Begin with Night Prayer. It is short, simple, and a beautiful way to end the day. After a week, add Morning Prayer. After a month, consider adding Evening Prayer.
2. Use a Guide: Follow a clear guide for Liturgy of the Hours, like the one you are reading now. Keep it bookmarked or printed for easy reference.
3. Find a Community: If possible, pray with others. Many parishes have a group that prays Morning or Evening Prayer together. If that is not possible, consider using a digital app that allows you to "pray along" with the Church.
4. Embrace the Rhythm: Do not get discouraged if you miss a day. The Liturgy of the Hours is a marathon, not a sprint. Simply pick up where you left off. The grace is in the habit, not in perfection.
5. Learn the Psalms: Over time, the Psalms will become a familiar language of prayer. They express the full range of human emotion, from joy to lament. Let them teach you how to pray.

Common Challenges and How to Overcome Them

Even with a great guide for Liturgy of the Hours, you will likely encounter obstacles. Here are a few common ones and solutions.

Feeling Overwhelmed by the Ribbons and Pages

The Breviary can look like a complex puzzle. Do not let it intimidate you. There are usually four ribbons: one for the current day, one for the proper of seasons, one for the proper of saints, and one for the common. A simple trick is to use a sticky note to mark your starting page each day. Most modern editions also have clear headings in bold, making navigation easier than you might expect.

Lack of Time

You do not need to pray every hour. The Church encourages the faithful to pray at least Morning and Evening Prayer. If even that feels challenging, commit to just one hour. Even five minutes of faithful, focused prayer is better than an hour of distracted rushing.

Dryness in Prayer

There will be days when the words feel meaningless. This is normal. The Liturgy of the Hours is not about feelings; it is about faithfulness. It is the prayer of the Church, not just your personal prayer. On dry days, simply offer the words as a gift to God, even if your heart feels empty. This is a profound act of faith.

The Deeper Meaning: Why Pray the Liturgy of the Hours?

This guide for Liturgy of the Hours would be incomplete without addressing the "why." Why should you commit to this structured prayer? The answer lies in connection. First, it connects you to the universal Church. As you pray the Psalms, you are joining millions of voices across the world and throughout history. Second, it connects you to Scripture. The Psalms become a living word in your mouth. Third, it connects you to time itself. You are no longer a victim of the clock; you are a sanctifier of time, offering each hour back to its Creator. The Divine Office transforms your daily routine into a continuous act of worship.

Conclusion: Your Journey Begins Today

The Liturgy of the Hours is a treasure of the Church, a deep well of living water waiting to be drawn. It does not require a theology degree or a lifetime of monastic training. It requires only an open heart and a willingness to begin. Use this guide for Liturgy of the Hours as a compass, not a rulebook. Let the Psalms be your teachers, let the rhythm of the hours be your anchor, and let the prayer of the Church become your own. Start today with Night Prayer. Let your lips be opened, and let your voice join the eternal hymn of praise that rises before the throne of God. The journey of a thousand prayers begins with a single verse. Open your Breviary, and begin.

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