

THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

*Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour:
~ Acts 3:1*

IN ORDER TO HAVE ANY KIND OF RELATIONSHIP at all with our Savior, it is necessary to pray. Through the working of grace, we are inspired to turn our hearts to God in prayer, and it is this prayer which will sustain us during our time in this world. Prayer was at the very heart of Jesus' message to humanity. Our Lord encouraged us to ask and seek for all good things in prayer and he promised us that our Heavenly Father would provide for our needs (see Lk 11:5-13). Indeed, Jesus told his followers "that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1).

St. Paul gives the whole Church an important mandate. He writes, "Through [Christ] then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God" (Heb 13:15). In responding to these words, the early Christians developed the custom of praying regularly at

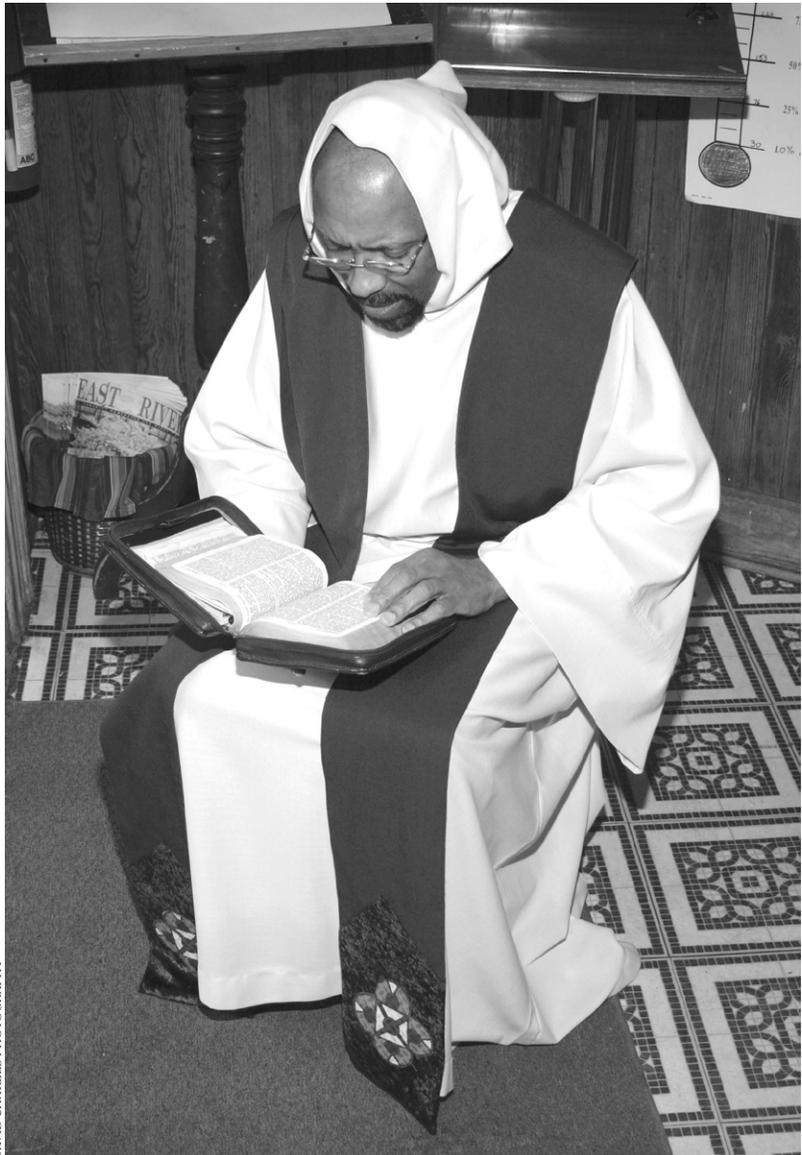
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fixed times during the day, so that the Church would be offering an unceasing sacrifice of praise. This practice of constant prayer at certain hours of the day gradually developed into what is now known as the Liturgy of the Hours.

While personal and private prayer is a necessary part of any authentically Christian life, the individual Christian's participation in the public prayer of the community is even more important. Jesus carefully emphasized the importance of praying with others and promised to be present in a particular

way in community prayer. In St. Matthew's Gospel, Christ gave us that wonderful promise: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). It is not enough to pray privately — there is power in the *public* prayer of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Why is the public prayer of the Church so power-



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ful? When we are gathered together in any liturgical action, whether it be at the celebration of Mass, or the Baptism of a child, or at a Liturgy of the Hours service, the people gathered in the church are not the only ones present. In any liturgical prayer of the Church, the whole Mystical Body of Christ is present — the saints in Heaven, the souls in Purgatory, and all the pilgrim faithful still united to the Church on earth. But not only is the Mystical Body of Christ present and prayerfully participating; choirs of angels also surround us in loving adoration of the Trinity. The liturgical prayer of the Church is indeed a celebration of the whole Heavenly Jerusalem. We are not isolated or alone, but united in love in the liturgy. We will only truly begin to understand the power of the liturgy when we are participating in the Heavenly liturgy — an experience that will bring us true joy and fulfillment.

The Liturgy of the Hours (sometimes called the Divine Office) is an integral part of the public prayer of the whole Church. It consists of a four-week cycle of singing Psalms, reading Scripture, and interceding for the needs of the whole Church. The Church gathers at various hours during the day to pray the liturgy. At



A 1910 photograph of a sister of the Dominican Order (Order of Preachers) (OP), founded by St. Dominic in the early 13th century

different times during the history of the Church, the number of times of prayer in a day has varied, but today in general there are five. We pray the *office of readings* in the early morning, *lauds* in the morning, *sext* at noontime, *vespers* in the early evening, and *compline* before bedtime. The hinges of the Liturgy of the Hours are lauds, also called morning prayer, and vespers, also called evening prayer. Through the Divine Office, the whole day and night is made holy by lifting our voices to God in praise. Indeed, time itself is made holy, as is the whole of human activity.

The Liturgy of the Hours is the prayer of the whole People of God. While in past centuries the Divine Office was prayed primarily by monks and religious, Vatican Council

II strongly emphasized the fact that the Liturgy of the Hours can be adapted so that all the faithful can participate in it. Because it is the official prayer of the Church, every member of the Church has the right to enter into this profound dialogue between the Church and our Father in Heaven. In fact, we are encouraged to enter into this timeless and beautiful prayer, as it is the liturgical action by which the Church on earth prays for the salvation of the world.

(CCC 1174-1178)

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