

# Spiritual Practice of the Divine Offices of Prayer

(By Joe Colletti, PhD)

Seven prayer offices have developed over the centuries to help ensure a day-long dialogue with God. "Seven times a day I praise you" (Psalm 119.164) is stated in the Psalms with the first office of prayer traditionally beginning in the middle of the night, the second one at 6 am, and the rest follow every three hours or so.

Matins/Vigils	3 am
Lauds	6 am
Prime	9 am
Sext	Noon
None	3 pm
Vespers	Twilight
Compline	Bedtime

## I. Background

The Daily Offices of Prayer have roots in ancient Judaism and were practiced by Jesus. Jesus began a day with prayer while it was still very dark. The Gospel of Mark states "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed (1.35)."

The Psalmist did the same

"I rise before dawn and seek your promises;  
I put my hope in your words.  
My eyes are awake before each watch of the night  
that I may meditate on your promises."  
(Psalm 119.147-148)

The Daily Offices of Prayer were continued by the early Christians such as Peter, John, and Cornelius. "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon" is noted in Acts 3.1 and "At noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray," is noted in Acts 10.9. And Cornelius said: Four days ago, unto this hour, I was praying in my house, at the ninth hour, and behold a man stood before me" (Acts 10:30).

The Daily Offices of Prayer continued throughout the centuries. The sixteenth century reformation gave renewed attention to the Divine Offices of Prayer as well as the liturgical renewal movement of the past few decades. Today, the Daily Offices of Prayer are practiced in Christian monasteries throughout the world.

## **II. Description**

Four of the prayer offices—Lauds (morning prayer), Sext (noon prayer), Vespers (early evening prayer), and Compline (night prayer)—are more readily practiced in the monasteries than the other three. Among these four, two of the offices—Lauds and Compline—are probably practiced more often among laypersons than the other two.

These four Offices of Prayer provide an opportunity for a continuous cycle of daily prayer that involves consecration, dedication, transition, and contemplation. A brief summary of this continuous cycle of daily prayer follows:

### Morning Hour of Prayer (Lauds)

The emphasis is on consecration. Let your morning prayer be a time of extraordinary consecration. “I give my life and this day to God for today is a new day” is prayerfully appropriate. “This new day is a gift from God and full of opportunities for service” is also a fitting remembrance.

### Noonday Hour of Prayer (Sext)

The emphasis is on dedication. Let your noonday prayer be a time of heightened commitment for at high noon the sun stands at its apex directly overhead. “I give thanks for the work that I have done so far today” is a helpful reflection and “I give thanks for the work that remains today” is an equally helpful reflection.

### Twilight Hour of Prayer (Vespers)

The emphasis is on transition—from our day activities and responsibilities to our night activities and responsibilities. There is a changeover happening around us particularly if our transitional prayer time occurs around sunset. This time can become very reflective as we look heavenward. It is a time that has a lot of visual spiritual qualities. The world around us can seem perfectly framed and intensely beautiful even in a dense urban setting. Tall trees are silhouetted against the sky in the midst of a decreasing evening light. Often, as the sun is setting, the clouds begin to glow with colors of

water and colors of fire. Buildings may also glow as the sun is reflected like molten gold within the windows of office buildings, apartments, and houses. Believing that God is saying to you that "you are as intensely beautiful" stimulates a lot of emotions especially if we allow the words to resonate within ourselves as we go about our evening activities and responsibilities.

### Night Hour of Prayer (Compline)

The emphasis is on contemplation. Compline means completion and thus it is this prayer office that completes the circle of the day. Compline is associated with darkness and thus what is hidden and unknown in our lives. There should be an emphasis on discovery that includes finding out how God had been present throughout the day. This time of discovery can be enhanced through the Ignatian practice of Examination of Consciousness which involves asking the following questions:

1. How has God been present in my day?
2. How did God speak to me today?
3. Did I resist God today?
4. How did I cooperate with God?
5. In what ways do I believe God calling me to a new awareness?
6. What needs healing in my life?

The three (3) other prayer offices—Prime (mid-morning prayer), None (mid-afternoon prayer), and Vigils (middle of the night prayer)—enhance a day-long dialogue with God. A brief summary of these prayer offices follows:

#### Mid-Morning Hour of Prayer (Prime)

One of the historical characteristics of Prime has been the recitation of ancient prayers that have expressed the core of the Christian faith such as the Athanasian Creed. Other ancient prayers that express the core of the Christian faith include the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed. Prime has also been historically characterized with prayers for the work of the day. In the United States, the average work day is often referred to as “9 to 5” meaning 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. One ancient prayer that can prepare us for the eight hour work day is the Peace Prayer of St. Francis. The prayer begins by asking God to make us an instrument of peace by sowing love instead of hatred, pardon instead of injury, and faith instead of doubt and ends with recognizing that in daily dying we are born to eternal life.

#### Mid-Afternoon Hour of Prayer (None)

The two historical characteristics of None has been the reading of psalms and litanies. The readings of psalms have been included historically in all of the hours of prayers. None, however, has consisted mainly of psalms. The psalms contain prayers that have a fully range of human feelings and can be used to express our love and pain as well as our deepest questions or concerns (click here for a description of the spiritual practice of Praying the Psalms). Litanies include centuries old forms of public and private prayer that center on invocations and petitions. The invocations generally praise God for the different ways we experience salvation and healing and the petitions generally ask for various graces and blessings (click here for a list of litanies).

#### Middle of the Night Hour of Prayer (Vigils)

Vigils (also referred as Night Watch) have historical roots in the pre-dawn vigil of Matins and the dawn vigil of Lauds. Together these two prayer offices bridge the deep darkness of the night with the break of light of the new day. It is a time surrounded by darkness and silence which provides for occasions for devotional watching or observances. It is also a time of waiting and anticipation. As the transition from night to day occurs we can be found waiting for God who “looks down from the heavens (Ps. 33.13) and promises

to instruct, teach, and counsel us "with my eye upon you (Ps. 32. 8)" and my "ears open to (your) cry (Ps. 34. 15)." At that moment we can know that "When the sun rises, people go out to their work and to their labor until the evening" (Psalm 104.22a-23). We also know that we are one of them and that what needs to be interwoven in our daily actions is a sense of love and justice for God and for our neighbors that is awoken through Vigils or the Night Watch experience (click here for a description of the spiritual practice of Vigils or the Night Watch).

### III. Prayers for the Divine Offices

The following prayers are taken from the Christian scriptures and are divided below among several of the Divine Offices of Prayer. These prayers are passages from the Psalms that are surrounded by an antiphon in accordance with an ancient monastic practice of taking a short verse from a psalm and reciting it before, during, and after the psalm. The antiphon serves as a special thought or reflection that relates to the passage and repeated for emphasis.

- Prayers for the Morning Hour of Prayer (Lauds)

The following prayer for the morning hour use an antiphon to emphasize "The unfolding of (God's) words gives light" and "it imparts understanding to the simple" (Psalm 139).

#### (Psalm 139)

**Antiphon: The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple** (v. 130).

Your decrees are wonderful;  
therefore my soul keeps them.  
The unfolding of your words gives light;  
it imparts understanding to the simple.  
With open mouth I pant,  
because I long for your commandments.  
Turn to me and be gracious to me,  
as is your custom toward those who love your name.  
(vv.129-132)

**Antiphon: The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple** (v. 130).

Keep my steps steady according to your promise,  
and never let iniquity have dominion over me.  
Redeem me from human oppression,  
that I may keep your precepts.  
Make your face shine upon your servant,  
and teach me your statutes.  
My eyes shed streams of tears  
whenever your law is not kept.  
(vv. 133-134)

**Antiphon: The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple** (v. 130).

- Prayers for the Noonday Hour of Prayer (Sext)

The following prayer for the noonday hour use an antiphon to emphasize that God can “make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun” (Psalm 37).

**(Psalm 37)**

**Antiphon: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.**

Do not fret because of evil men  
or be envious of those who do wrong;  
for like the grass they will soon wither,  
like green plants they will soon die away.  
Trust in the LORD and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
(vv. 1-3)

**Antiphon: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.**

Delight yourself in the LORD  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him and he will do this:  
He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,  
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.  
(vv. 4-6)

**Antiphon: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.**

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;  
do not fret when men succeed in their ways,  
when they carry out their wicked schemes.  
Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;  
do not fret—it leads only to evil.  
For evil men will be cut off,  
but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.  
(vv. 7-9)

**Antiphon: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.**

- Prayers for the Twilight Hour of Prayer (Vespers)

The following prayer for the twilight hour use an antiphon to emphasize that "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night" (Psalm 139).

### (Psalm 139)

**Antiphon: Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night (v. 11)**

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.  
(vv 1-5)

**Antiphon: Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night (v. 11)**

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light around me become night,"  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is as bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.  
For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
(vv. 11-15)

**Antiphon: Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night (v. 11)**

Prayers for the Night Hour of Prayer (Compline)

The following prayer for the night hour uses an antiphon to emphasize that the Lord “gives me counsel” & “in the night also my heart instructs me” (Ps 16).

**(Psalm 16)**

**Antiphon: I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.**

Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge.  
I say to the LORD, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.’  
As for the holy ones in the land, they are the noble,  
in whom is all my delight.

Those who choose another god multiply their sorrows; their drink-offerings  
of blood I will not pour out or take their names upon my lips.

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;

I have a goodly heritage.

(vv. 1 – 6)

**Antiphon: I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.**

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel;  
in the night also my heart instructs me.  
I keep the LORD always before me;  
because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.  
Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices;  
my body also rests secure.

For you do not give me up to Sheol or let your faithful one see the Pit.

You show me the path of life.

In your presence there is fullness of joy;  
in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

(vv. 7 – 11)

**Antiphon: I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.**