

Celebrating Sunday Evening Prayer

Recently an adaptation of Evening Prayer has been prepared, firmly based on *The Divine Office* but better suited for parish use, and especially for weekly Sunday celebrations. It has been authorised for use in England and Wales by the Bishops' Conference Department for Christian Life and Worship

This adaptation has given careful attention to how Evening Prayer may be ministered in such a way as to deepen the quality of the liturgy, and make more effective the invitation to pray the liturgy.

- Singing Evening Prayer might seem a daunting prospect, but skills can be developed in easy stages.
- The Psalms may sometimes seem difficult texts to pray, but this adaptation suggests limiting the number of different psalms used, so the congregation may become more familiar with a few texts and learn how to make them their own through prayer, rather than being oppressed by unfamiliar words.
- The Liturgy of the Hours can seem very wordy, but Celebrating Sunday Evening Prayer encourages the use of symbol and silence to help ensure that the words used are used in the context of prayer.

More help in praying the Liturgy

The Liturgy Office has produced a wide range of materials to assist with the prayerful celebration of the liturgy in general and of Mass in particular. A general guide to the worthy celebration of Mass can be found in *Celebrating the Mass*, a document published in 2005 by the Bishops of England and Wales.

This leaflet is one of a series of resources prepared by the Liturgy Office to accompany the publication of *Celebrating Sunday Evening Prayer* and to support parish celebrations of the Prayer of the Church. ©2006 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

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**Liturgy
Office**
ENGLAND
& WALES

Parish Prayer

What is the Church? The Church is a community that prays; a people singing praise and voicing their petitions, a people of God... The church is before all else a society of worship; its most pressing concern is prayer. The Church sets before itself one primary aim: to put people in touch with God; indeed in communion with him; the Church, as the Council teaches, is the sign and instrument of intimate union with God"

Pope Paul VI. *General Address*, 1971

One of the 'signs of the times' in today's world, is that despite widespread secularization, there is a widespread demand for spirituality, a demand which expresses itself in large part as a renewed need for prayer? Other religions offer their own responses to this need, and sometimes they do so in appealing ways. But we who have received the grace of believing in Christ, the revealer of the Father and the Saviour of the world, have a duty to show to what depths the relationship with Christ can lead.

Our Christian communities must become genuine 'schools' of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly 'falls in love'. Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history: by opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan.

Pope John Paul II *Novo Millennio Inuente*, 33, 34

Forms of Prayer

Prayer takes many forms. For example private prayer, devotional prayer and, pre-eminently, liturgical prayer.

Liturgical prayer is the pre-eminent form of prayer. There are two reasons for its great significance. It is not only 'our' prayer, but it is first and foremost our participation in the prayer of Christ himself. When we celebrate Mass, or when we join in the Liturgy of the Hours we join together in the sacrifice of praise which Jesus offered to the Father.

The second reason for the significance of liturgical prayer is that it is truly the prayer of the Church. When we pray the liturgy, we pray as members of the Body of Christ, united with Christ our head. In baptism we were united with Jesus and with each other. At our baptism, we were anointed also, as a sign that united with Christ, all the baptised share in his priesthood. We are through his gift, 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.' When we celebrate the liturgy we pray as a community, united with one another and united with Christ.

Difficulties with Prayer

However, for all of its dignity and importance, there are certain difficulties with regard to our praying of the liturgy. When we pray alone, we can to a large extent, set our own pace. We notice when we are getting distracted and can take a moment to re-focus and for example re-read a passage of scripture or recollect our thoughts.

It is not so easy to do this in the liturgy, for the liturgy has its own momentum. It is not true, but sometimes we can sometimes feel that, in the liturgy, it does not matter whether we are there or not, praying or not. How we participate in fact does make a great difference. But it is true that with or without us the liturgy will continue. And because this is so, sometimes people can get used to just 'being at the liturgy', more as spectators not so much as prayerful participants.

This is perhaps a particular danger at Mass, where so many 'exterior' things happen – including processions, Readings, homily, Bidding Prayers, and so on - that we can get distracted from the 'interior' action of prayer. This is a danger not only for individuals, but for the community as a whole. Sometimes there can be such a focus in doing the right things in the right order, that we don't allow sufficient time and space to pray the various elements. This is a particular risk when the only time a community gathers for liturgy is on a Sunday and for Mass. The Church strongly encourages us to take part in various forms of the liturgy, not only Sunday Mass, when the whole community gathers, but also celebrations of Mass on other occasions, in smaller gatherings, when the celebration can more easily respond to our various circumstances and our different needs.

Enlivening Liturgical Prayer

The celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours is also important. A series of periods of prayer through which the Church joins with Christ in prayer through each day. The key times of prayer are in the Morning and Evening. These times are kept in many parishes, and also by many individuals who pray this form of Liturgy with the Church, whether they are able to gather with a particular community or not.

Sunday Evening Prayer has a particular significance. This prayer, which brings the prayer of the Lord's Day to its close, is something which all parishes are encouraged to keep.

Pastors should see to it that the chief hours, vespers particularly, are celebrated in common in church on Sundays and the more solemn feasts.

Sacrosanctum Concilium 100

The Liturgy of the Hours has a different rhythm to the Mass, and it contains less action, less movement. It provides a very helpful complement to the celebration of the Mass, especially in the way it lends itself to somewhat more extended periods of silence and reflection on the word of God, particularly through its use of the psalms and canticles.