

## + PAX

April 8, 2024

Solemnity of the Annunciation of our Lord

Dear Retreatant,

Welcome. I have been invited to write several paragraphs regarding liturgical prayer and chant. In this peak age of information technology, it's hardly necessary for me to spill more ink in terms of '*what it is*' or on '*general instruction*'. But I will provide brief exhortations and then point you to the fundamental documents and resources to help orientate yourself. I ended up pasting large segments of these documents just in case the reader decided not to indulge in the original documents. You may, after all that research, later on decide that you're no more oriented and perhaps even more disoriented than before because it is "TMI" (too much information). I am here to reassure you that all shall be well. If you are a new to liturgical prayer, or to prayer in general, I will borrow a nonliturgical phrase from popular culture: *Keep Calm and Pray On!*

For those who are well-versed in prayer, I am certain you'll agree with me that prayer is not something you understand from a document or a workshop. Prayer is a personal encounter with God – this is the basis of the retreat. This retreat is to provide retreatants with the landscape, horarium, the praying community, and the spiritual guidance for you to not simply encounter liturgical prayer, but to *live, breathe, eat, sleep, wake, speak, and move* prayerfully – That is, to live within the Sacred Heart of Jesus. For to live a liturgical life is to assume the heart of the praying church.

What is liturgy? The word Liturgy comes from the word Greek word *leitourgos*, which means "public work" or a "service in the name of/on behalf of the people." In Christian tradition it means the participation of the People of God in "the work of God." (CCC § 1069). Our Catholic faith is at foundation a covenantal relationship with God. From the beginning, God forges the Hebrews into a unified consecrated people passing through the Red Sea and calls them to gather into worship. The Hebrew word for such an assembly is "*Qahal*"; and the first, great, prototypical *Qahal* is at Mount Sinai. The Greek translation for *Qahal* is "*ekklesia*", and it is our word for church. The work of God is salvation unfolded from the bosom of the Father and offered to us in the Son and Spirit. This is the "work of God", the liturgy in which the Church participates. The Holy Trinity is the source and foundation of the liturgy, calling us to participation through Christ, the Head. The Body, which is the *Ekklesia*, follows Christ our Redeemer and High priest, and continues the work of our redemption.

The origin of the liturgy is a Divine decision to summon a people, give them His word, and enter into covenant with them. We join a liturgy already in progress, begun when the Father acted on his good pleasure and gave His Son and Spirit. The liturgy flows from the side of Christ on the cross, as he completes the will of his Father, and it is extended to us by the Holy Spirit. Liturgy then is the activity of Christ in his Body.

Hence it is important to know that the Liturgy informs us, rather than we inform the liturgy. This is the basis of prayer, which is the encounter of God and the soul.

It is a common mistake to think of liturgy as a genre of music for mass, or a specific rite through which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is performed. These are very narrow understandings of what liturgy truly is. Remember that liturgy is the Work of God in which Christ had begun as the work of our salvation, and through which the work of our redemption is accomplished.

Liturgy does not simply refer to the mass. The Holy Mass is the source and summit of the entire liturgical practice, but liturgy does not stop there! It may be shocking to you, to hear me say that Holy Mass is not enough. Just as no mountain summit is ever the bulk of the mountain itself, the Eucharistic Mass spans a mere 1-2 hours, but what about the other 22-23 hours? Since liturgy is the medium through which we are sanctified and redeemed, it has to encompass our entire life. The Apostle exhorts us to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thess 5:16). The merits and grace from Christ's Holy Sacrifice flows forth from the Mass and spills over, extending through time, as *Leitourgia*, when the Liturgy of the Hours is celebrated by commemorating Christ's life, death and resurrection, punctuating the day at specific hours with prayer, hence consecrating the course of day and night. The Liturgy of the Hours is also known as the Divine Office.

Possibly the top two questions at this point for a regular retreatant would be the following. Links included here provide brief and excellent explanations, although admittedly not exhaustive:

1) What is the Liturgy of the Hours / Divine Office?

<https://www.pluscardenabbey.org/divine-office>

<https://www.stbernardabbey.com/the-divine-office>

<https://christdesert.org/prayer/opus-dei/the-spirit-of-the-monastic-office>

2) Why pray in Latin?

<https://www.pluscardenabbey.org/why-latin>

The reader is also encouraged to read the Church's document: *The General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* (GILH) which draws from *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

#### *Sacrosanctum Concilium*

"Christ accomplishes the work of redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God in the Holy Spirit through the Church not only when the Eucharist is celebrated and the sacraments administered, but also in other ways, especially by praying the Liturgy of the Hours. Christ is present when his community comes together, when the word of God is proclaimed and when the Church prays and sings."

#### *The General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*

"In the Liturgy of the Hours, the Church exercises the priestly office of

her head and constantly offers God a sacrifice of praise, 'a verbal sacrifice that is offered every time we acknowledge his name'. This prayer is 'the voice of the bride addressing her bridegroom; it is the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father'. 'Hence all who perform this service are not only fulfilling the duty of the Church, but also are sharing in the greatest honour accorded to Christ's spouse, for by offering these praises to God they are standing before God's throne in the name of the Church their Mother."

Pope St. Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution: *Laudis canticum*:

"Our Redeemer, as he himself had entered into life through his prayer and sacrifice wished that this should not cease throughout the ages in his Mystical Body, the Church, and so the official prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father. Thus when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his in us.

In order that this shall come about it is necessary that that warm and living love for Scripture which emanates from the Liturgy of the Hours shall be renewed among all, so that in truth Sacred Scripture becomes the principal source of all Christian prayer. The psalms especially, showing as they do the action of God in the history of salvation, must be better understood by the People of God, and this will come about more easily if among the clergy there is promoted a deeper study of the psalms as they are used in the liturgy, and if this is then handed on to the faithful by efficient catechesis. Then this more fruitful use of the Scriptures in the Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours will bring about a continuous meditation on the history of salvation and its continuation in the life of men.

Since the life of Christ in his Mystical Body perfects and elevates the personal life of each of the faithful, there can be no opposition between the prayer of Christ and the personal prayer of the individual, but instead the relationship between them is strengthened by the Divine Office. Mental prayer is nourished by the readings and psalms and other parts of the Liturgy of the Hours; and if the method and form of the celebration is chosen which most helps the persons taking part, one's personal, living prayer must of necessity be helped. Then the prayer of the Office as it becomes truly personal prayer forms a clear link between the liturgy and the whole life of the Christian, since every hour of the day and night is itself a kind of *leitourgia* wherein they give themselves to the ministry of the love of God and their fellow-men, and are joined to the actions of Christ who by his life among men and by his sacrifice sanctified the life of men. This deepest truth of the Christian life is shown forth and at the same time brought about by the Liturgy of the Hours, and so it is offered to all the faithful, even to those who are not bound by law to recite it."

It follows then that the Liturgy of the Mass and what flows from that, the Liturgy of the hours is not an alternative to devotional prayer. It is the duty, the *leitourgia* of the Church, in which lay persons are members, and are exhorted to pray as one body of Christ. "For whoever takes part in the Liturgy of the Hours makes the Lord's people grow by imparting to them a hidden apostolic fruitfulness." (GILH)

"Wherever groups of the laity are gathered and whatever the reason which has brought them together, such as prayer or the apostolate, they are encouraged to recite the Church's Office, by celebrating part of the Liturgy of the Hours. For they should learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth especially through liturgical worship; they must remember that by public worship and prayer they can have an impact on all men and contribute to the salvation of the whole world.

Finally, it is fitting that the family, as the domestic sanctuary of the Church, should not only offer common prayer to God but also say certain parts of the Liturgy of the Hours, in this way uniting themselves more closely to the Church." (GILH)

Liturgy is where Heaven meets Earth. It is bride's response of the call of her bridegroom; her song of love, adoration, praise and worship. Liturgy is the just worship of God. This song is itself a gift freely and lovingly offered to the bride because she needs it for her transformation and redemption; so that she can gift it back to the Almighty Creator. Liturgy then, is of utmost importance to the bride, as it is the prescribed medium through which she responds to her bridegroom. Liturgy, because it is the just worship of God should be deeply loved, treasured, and performed with the utmost care, beauty, and reverence. It is like the Ciborium that holds the Body of Christ; or the Chalice that holds the cup of our salvation -- the Blood of Christ. This vessel, or medium, in we carry our love, adoration, worship and prayers to God, is Liturgy. And that is why we sing, for as Augustine puts it, "*Cantare amantis est*", *only the lover who sings*.

In a word, we are exhorted to live a liturgical, sacramental life. A Liturgical life is a Divine Life, where Heaven meets Earth within ourselves. Liturgy refers to all sacraments, sacramentals, and paraliturgical actions. This, I believe is exemplified in the Benedictine monastic life, where liturgy is not what we perform for 2 hours a day but how we live. Liturgy is our life.

The medium (liturgy) is expressed and fulfilled in us through the medium of our voice and our bodies over the passage of time -- the 24-hour diem, the liturgical year, and the yearly cycles. We use Gregorian chant to express liturgy vocally. Latin is reserved as our liturgical language. We are silent throughout the day, save for the seven times during the day and the one night time prayer, when we come together as a community for the Liturgy of the Hours where we pray and meditate on scripture, writings of the Church Fathers, and/or the life of Saints. When our voices break the Grand Silence, it is expressed in chant from the moment we arise to pray Vigils till evening close at Compline when Grand Silence envelopes the night. In the darkest

night when we put to death the old man and arise to put on Christ, even then the liturgy instructs our hearts as the chant continues to pray in us (cf. Ps 16:7). We chant our prayers before and after meals. We greet each other in Latin "*Benedícite!*". We pray in latin before any activity. Our bodies are in a constant flux of blessing ourselves with Holy water; genuflecting each time we pass the chapel; bowing our heads towards each other as we recognize Christ in our brethren; deep-bowing every time we say our doxologies or the *Pater Noster*. Our bodily movements contain a fluidity of liturgical beauty and our countenance maintains a reverent and sweet silence, as if we were ever-present before the Blessed Sacrament, because indeed, we are ever-seeking the face of the Lord! In spirit and in flesh, liturgy is carried out through us in Christ. When we live a sacramental, liturgical life, we become the medium for the medium – the salt of the earth.

Liturgy leads to the union of both the humanity and divinity, such that the human person subordinates the visible to the invisible, and action to contemplation. It keeps us focused away from ourselves and towards the New Jerusalem, the destination which we seek. Liturgy is supposed to accomplish within us a deep transformation, a metanoia, such that we may be emptied of ourselves and become holy vessels and temples of God, a dwelling place for the Holy Trinity so that we may attain to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ.

The structure of this retreat is the Benedictine Monastic Life, which is the Liturgical Life lived par excellence. Hence, in this retreat you will be given the opportunity to live within the heart of the praying church, encountering God through prayer experientially, rather than through instructive workshops. Conferences and meditations are offered as one would encounter in monastic communities.

The Divine Office is the center of the Benedictine Life, referred to by St. Benedict as the *Opus Dei*, 'The Work of God'. Situated near the beginning of the 73 chapters of the St. Benedict's Rule are 13 chapters dedicated to the Divine Office. The other chapters in the Rule refer frequently back to the *Opus Dei*.

"On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion for frivolity. Indeed, **nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God**"

- Chapter 43, On Those Who Come Late to the Work of God or to Table,  
*Rule of St. Benedict*

The maxim of St. Benedict's Rule to prefer nothing to the *Opus Dei* is repeated and mirrored in the phrase "to prefer nothing whatever to Christ", which is above all, to love God and Brethren. St. Benedict equates the love of Christ, the love of God and Brethren, to be manifest in the *Opus Dei*.

“To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. **Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ**, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.”

- Chapter 72, The Good Zeal of Monks, *Rule of St. Benedict*

I pray that this would be a very blessed retreat for you and may you encounter the Lord in fresh and new ways. Thank you, for your participation in the *Leitourgia*, the *Opus Dei*, to pray in our Motherland of Canada. May the Holy Martyrs, and Holy men and women of Canada, pray for us.

Yours in Christ,  
Serene Lai  
Co-foundress of the School of St. Benedict

**Resources:**

1) *The General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours*  
(<https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Rites/GILH.pdf>)

2) *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican II, Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy.  
[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html))

3) Pope St. Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution: *Laudis canticum*  
([https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Rites/Laudis\\_canticum.pdf](https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Rites/Laudis_canticum.pdf))

**Pray the Liturgy of the Hours Online:**

- 1) [universalis.org](http://universalis.org)
- 2) <https://divineoffice.org>
- 3) <https://www.divinumofficium.com>
- 4) <https://barrouxchant.com>
- 5) <https://glenstal.com/abbey/our-prayer>

**Gregorian Chant Resources:**

<https://www.solesmes.com/gregorian-musical-forms>  
<https://clearcreekmonks.org/abbey/gregorian-chant>  
<https://abbaye-fontgombault.fr/website/pages/EN/gregorien.html>