

The Lay Office of Readings

Volume I
Prayers and Scripture

Preliminary Edition

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*You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation,
a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of
the darkness into his wonderful light. – 1 Peter 2:9*

The Design of the Office

Introduction

Who should say this Office

This Lay Office of Readings has been designed with two sets of people in mind. The first are those who unable to join in any part of the Divine Office as said by priests and religious, and would like some formal prayer as part of their daily lives. The second are those who can say part of the Divine Office, usually Morning or Evening Prayer, but would like to include an Office of Readings.

The Lay Office is said once a day, and can be said at any time of day or night, alone or in a group, indoors, outside, or when travelling. The only exception is: it is best not said last thing at night. The meditative readings may get your mind working, and make it harder to get to sleep. The Church provides us with a calming and gentle Night Prayer which is ideally suited for this purpose.

The Divine Office

(Also called *The Liturgy of the Hours*, or *The Breviary*.) From the earliest days of the Church, priests, monks and nuns have recited the psalms as part of their daily prayers. This has always been part of their work: to offer up prayers and entreaties to God and offset the heedless sin of the world around them. The Second Vatican Council, in the Apostolic Constitution *The Canticle of Praise*, renewed this obligation on priests and religious. It also made it clear that the Council wanted the laity to be involved as much as possible. (See n1, 20, 27, etc.)

With a few exceptions this has not happened. There seem to be a number of reasons for this, mostly practical. Lay people, even the most devout, may find it difficult to attend daily mass as the Church encourages us to do. Then to find time to make a second visit to the church and take part in the Office becomes almost impossible. At best, there may be opportunities to join in either Morning or Evening prayer; usually only if these are attached to the mass.

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This leaves out the Office of Readings. In some ways this is the most important Office of the day, as it contains a large reading from Scripture, not just the snippets given in the other Offices. Also these readings are sequential, so the stories and themes are brought to life. There is a second reading from a spiritual writer which helps with advice, or gives meditations, on the spiritual life.

This Lay Office has been prepared for two types of people: those who can attend some of the Offices said by priests or religious, and want expand their prayers by including Readings; and those who cannot take part in the Divine Office at all. For these, it is hoped, a complete set of prayers and meditations for the whole year has been provided.

In order to cater for both these types, the number of psalms has been reduced to one a day, and the intercessions shortened and simplified. A short reading from Scripture has been given, with the option of using a long reading following the plan in Volume II.

The Second Reading – not from Scripture – has been chosen from writings applicable to a Christian life lived in the world. The ones in the Divine Office are generally more designed for religious life, and may be simply too spiritual to be of any use to a normal layman. Or they may be too intellectual for someone who has not had seminary training, or does not have the time or peace of a monastery to reflect on them.

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Overall the Lay Office follows the pattern of the Office of Readings in the Divine Office, with a few changes. It was felt that the fundamental requirement for this Office is that the people reciting it should enjoy it. For this reason, some of the longer and more repetitive psalms have been left out, also those which simply go over the history of Israel. Most of the lines in the psalms which express hatred or a desire for revenge have been deleted.

Hymns

Hymns have been chosen from those which have good words and tunes, but are less well known. For this reason, hymns which are in the regular cycle of the Divine Office have been avoided if possible. Of course, some well-known and popular hymns have had to be included, especially where they fit the feast or season better than any other.

As some members of your group may not know the hymn, it may be best to have a rehearsal beforehand. If no-one knows the hymn, and you cannot have a rehearsal, then it can be said instead of sung.

Hymns for ordinary days are arranged on an eight-week cycle; with an optional set of seven hymns (“the one-week cycle”), taken from the old Roman Breviary. This cycle can replace any week of the eight-week cycle; but is more suitable for weeks when there are no major feasts. Special hymns are given for the major feasts.

Hymns for the seasons of Advent, Lent and Easter are based on a shorter cycle, with different hymns for the special days like Laetare Sunday in Lent, and the days before, during, and after the great Solemnities the year.

For Easter, Easter hymns are used up to Low Sunday, then the theme of Easter is dropped but joyful hymns are used until Pentecost.

With each hymn the melody line has been given to aid singing. The name of the tune and the metre is given in red at the top of

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the hymn, to allow accompaniment or alternative tunes, where these are possible.

It cannot be made too clear that all these hymns are suggestions *only*. Any other suitable hymn can be substituted.

Psalms

The psalms are cries from the heart to God, and as such often have no format and no consistent length. The longer psalms have been split following, nearly always, the arrangement in the Divine Office. As a rough guide, the length of the psalm has been set at 100-200 words. This rule has been broken for psalms like 104 which has more than 200 words, but could not easily be divided.

On the basis of one psalm, or section of psalm, a day, this means that the entire psalter is read through during the 34 weeks of Ordinary Time. Most of these are repeated during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Easter; so the average psalm is read twice a year.

This has left no room for the Canticles used in the Divine Office. These, if appropriate, have been used on major Feasts and Common Offices.

As a general rule, the penitential psalms are on Fridays, and the joyful psalms on Sundays. The long and carefully-constructed psalm 119, praising God's law, is said on Saturdays, the Jewish Sabbath; interspersed with some of the pilgrimage psalms 120-134.

One psalm has been left out: Psalm 83 refers to Israel's ancient enemies, which mean nothing to people today. Psalms 105-107 which simply recount Israel's history as told in the Old Testament, have been greatly reduced.

A brief reading of the psalms in their original form will show a mass of hatred and desire for revenge. This causes problems for Christians, so sections like these have been edited out. On the grounds that those reciting the office do not need to know all the editing details, each psalm is simply marked as "Complete" or "Reduced". The full psalm can always be read in the Bible.

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Readings

The Scripture Readings are based on those in the Divine Office. Two alternatives have been given: short and long.

The shorter one is printed in full. Most are taken from the readings in the Divine Office, except where these were thought not to be applicable to lay people. If you wish to have the longer reading instead, then a reference is given in the accompanying Volume.

The Second reading – not from Scripture – has been chosen mainly from writings applicable to a Christian life lived in the world. This is explained in the accompanying Volume.

On Feast days a Third reading is added, on or by the saint in question.

All of these readings are, of course, only suggestions; any other readings can be substituted.

Intercessions

These have been deliberately made short and simple. Various people have contributed prayers: all have agreed to be anonymous. Prayers have been kept to four per day, so there is plenty of scope for adding personal intentions.

There are no special themes to the prayers, except that the last prayer on Fridays is always for the dead.

Prayers in the Divine Office are said at specific times during the day. The Lay Office may be said at any time. Where the prayer mentions the time of day – as in “let us pray for all who will suffer persecution today” – then this has been changed to “let us pray for all who will suffer/have suffered persecution today”

The Lay Office may be said in groups or alone. Rather than have I/we in every prayer, it has been limited to “we”. People saying the Office on their own must remember they are praying on behalf of the whole Church.