

## Prayers of the Office

The *Divine Office* (or “Liturgy of the Hours”) said by priests and religious during the course of the day consists of the Office of Readings, Morning Prayer, Prayer during the Day, Evening Prayer and Night Prayer. In recent years lay people have been increasingly introduced to “The Prayer of the Church” - usually just Morning and Evening Prayer - said together in church perhaps before morning or evening Mass, though many have also have adopted the complete Office as part of their own personal prayer.

In many respects parts of the “Liturgy of the Hours” - particularly Morning, Evening and Night Prayer - are liturgies of the word in their own right with psalms in this case ahead of an Old or New Testament reading, followed by a short responsorial and then a gospel reading (the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, or the *Nunc Dimittis* respectively) each beginning by silently making the sign of the cross just as the gospel reading at Mass begins with the signing of the forehead, lips and heart.<sup>1</sup>

Because these three gospel passages are prayed every day as part of the Office, it can become very easy to say them almost mechanically and their meaning and context can be lost in what can thus become almost rote recitation.

The *Benedictus* (“The Song of Zechariah”) (Lk 1 v 68-79):

+ *Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel!*  
*He has visited his people and redeemed them.*

*He has raised up for us a mighty saviour*  
*in the house of David his servant,*  
*as he promised by the lips of holy men,*  
*those who were his prophets from of old.*

*A saviour who would free us from our foes,*  
*from the hands of all who hate us.*  
*So his love for our fathers is fulfilled*  
*and his holy covenant remembered.*

*He swore to Abraham our father to grant us,*  
*that free from fear, and saved from the hands of our foes,*  
*we might serve him in holiness and justice*  
*all the days of our life in his presence.*

*As for you, little child,*  
*you shall be called a prophet of God, the Most High.*  
*You shall go ahead of the Lord*  
*to prepare his ways before him.*

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<sup>1</sup> (These) Gospel canticles should be accorded the same solemnity and dignity as is usual for the hearing of the Gospel” (para 138 of *The General Instruction on The Liturgy of the Hours*).

*To make known to his people their salvation  
through forgiveness of all their sins,  
the loving-kindness of the heart of our God  
who visits us like the dawn from on high.  
He will give light to those in darkness,  
those who dwell in the shadow of death,  
and guide us into the way of peace.*

**T**he angel Gabriel had announced the conception of John the Baptist to his aged parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, but because Zechariah doubted the angel's message he lost the power of speech until the occasion of John's circumcision. Asked what he wanted his son to be called, Zechariah asked for a writing tablet and wrote the name "John", the name given him by the angel, therefore his declaration of faith now in God's message. Immediately his speech returned and, filled with the Holy Spirit, he spoke the prophecy concerning his son which we now call the *Benedictus*.

**I**t is actually both an affirmation of faith as well as a prophecy. Zechariah acknowledges the truth of the Old Testament prophecies that had foretold the coming of a Messiah who would be born into the house of David, echoing the promises made by God all the way back to the time of Abraham. He then goes on to declare, through the insight given him by the Holy Spirit, that the mission of his own son, John, would be to prepare the way for the promised Messiah. His would be a ministry of baptism by which people would have their sins forgiven and thus be ready to receive the good news of salvation that Jesus would bring to all who would come to faith in him and follow him. It is fitting that this prophecy should be a part of our Morning Prayer, reminding us at the beginning of each day of our own mission received at baptism to be witnesses and prophets for God just like John: "As for you (too), little child..."

**The Magnificat** ("The Song of the Virgin Mary") (Lk 1 v 46-55):

*+ My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God, my Saviour.  
He looks on his servant in her lowliness;  
henceforth all ages will call me blessed.*

*The Almighty works marvels for me.  
Holy his name!*

*His mercy is from age to age,  
on those who fear him.*

*He puts forth his arm in strength  
and scatters the proud-hearted.  
He casts the mighty from their thrones  
and raises the lowly.*

*He fills the starving with good things,*

*sends the rich away empty.  
He protects Israel, his servant,  
remembering his mercy,  
the mercy promised to our fathers,  
to Abraham and his sons for ever.*

**M**ary had accepted God's invitation to be the mother of Jesus, an invitation brought by the angel Gabriel. She had then travelled to visit her cousin Elizabeth to be with her in the final weeks before she gave birth to her son John. The *Magnificat* is Mary's prayer of praise in light of all the mysterious things that were going on in the conceptions of both their babies. It is also an act of humility in which Mary gives glory to God for those mysteries, things that were in every sense beyond her.

She begins with an acknowledgement of the reality of her situation, an act of faith in how things are: that God has asked her to be the mother of his Son and by the further gift of his grace she accepted and, as we might say, things would never be the same again because of the consequences of her "yes" to God. Somehow, in her deep faith and trust in God's will for her, Mary anticipates blessedness – not as a personal attribute, but as a consequence of what God will achieve through her. She will be called blessed (*blessēd*) because the birth of her son will be a blessed (*blessēd*) event.

Conscious of her unworthiness and no doubt asking "Why me?", Mary then reflects on the way in which God's power has been manifested down through the ages through all the great prophets and judges and kings he appointed to lead his chosen people and the things he accomplished through them. Then somehow – and it remains a mystery to Mary ("Why me?") – God had now chosen her to be a part of his plan, indeed the ultimate part as the means by which the promised Messiah would come into the world.

If we ever find ourselves responding "I'm not worthy" to the experience of God's call in our life, such a reaction pales in comparison. Mary would have had every justification for questioning God's invitation: a call not to ministry or priesthood but to be the mother of Christ! But with great humility, faith and trust, even though no doubt overwhelmed by the mystery of it all, her response is an unequivocal "yes". One of the greatest lessons we can take from Mary is the fact that with every call from God comes the grace necessary to carry out what he asks of us.

**The *Nunc Dimittis*** ("The Canticle of Simeon") (Lk 2 v 29-32):

*+ At last, all-powerful Master,  
you give leave you your servant  
to go in peace, according to your promise.*

*For my eyes have seen your salvation  
which you have prepared for all nations,  
the light to enlighten the Gentiles  
and give glory to Israel, your people.*

**L**uke tells us that the Holy Spirit had revealed to the “upright and devout” elder, Simeon, that he wouldn’t die until he had seen the promised Messiah. How long he had been waiting we don’t know; what exactly he expected to see we don’t know; but what we do know is that on the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to present him in the temple, somehow (mystery was at work again) Simeon recognised him and, taking Jesus into his arms, offered his prayer of faith to God: he had indeed seen the Messiah and now he could die in peace.

**T**he *Nunc Dimittis* probably seems more immediately a prayer by which we commit ourselves into God’s hands through the night. At the same time for me as a priest, certainly, and for each of us who has received holy communion that day, it is also a very profound prayer of faith. In the Blessed Sacrament we too held Jesus in our hands just as surely as Simeon did and our “Amen” at communion was the affirmation of our faith in that reality. That was the spiritual high point of our day and we are hopefully at peace with the thought that, like Simeon, God could call us home during the night. If he doesn’t, then we would hope to awake to another day in his service and, perhaps, the opportunity to hold and receive Our Lord once again.

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**T**here is a great element of mystery surrounding each of these prayers of the Office. They become, therefore, an acknowledgement for us that we are not in charge of our lives, but that God is. In each prayer there is a profound act of faith and trust (on the part of Zechariah, Mary and Simeon and which we therefore echo) in the providence and action of God in our lives and for this they (and we) give God the praise and glory.

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