

Obligation of the Liturgy of the Hours

ROME, NOV. 22, 2011 (Zenit.org); Answered by Legionary of Christ Father Edward McNamara, professor of liturgy at the Regina Apostolorum university.

Q: I learned from an older priest that the breviary obligation binds a transitional deacon and priest under pains of mortal sin. I searched canon law and the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours but found no clear answer. What is the right way to think of that? -- L.M., Etang Rey, Haiti

A: During the development process for the 1983 Code of Canon Law it was decided to remove expressions such as "under pain of mortal sin" with respect to the external prescriptions of Church law. In part this was done to distinguish Church law and the moral law. Church law covers the external relationship of individuals in the Christian community. Since sin also involves internal factors, the law, in itself, does not bind under pain of sin. This technical distinction does not mean that no sin is committed by transgressing Church law. The fact that the code no longer binds attending Sunday Mass under pain of mortal sin does not change the fact that willful and inexcusable absence is mortally sinful.

With respect to the obligation of the Liturgy of the Hours for transitional deacons and priests, the Congregation for Divine Worship on Nov. 15, 2000, issued a formal response to a doubt (Prot No. 2330/00/L) on this topic. This unofficial English translation was published by the liturgy office of the U.S. bishops' conference. The congregation first makes a substantial affirmation regarding the nature of the Liturgy of the Hours:

"The integral and daily celebration of the *Liturgy of the Hours* is, for priests and deacons on the way to the priesthood, a substantial part of their ecclesial ministry.

"Only an impoverished vision would look at this responsibility as a mere fulfilling of a canonical obligation, even though it is such, and not keep in mind that the sacramental ordination confers on the deacon and on the priest a special office to lift up to the one and triune God praise for His goodness, for His sovereign beauty, and for his merciful design for our supernatural salvation. Along with praise, priests and deacons present before the Divine Majesty a prayer of intercession so as to worthily respond to the spiritual and temporal necessities of the Church and all humanity.

"In effect, even in similar circumstances, these prayers do not constitute a private act but rather form part of the public worship of the Church, in such a way that upon reciting the Hours, the sacred minister fulfills his ecclesial duty: the priest or deacon who in the intimacy of the Church, or of an oratory, or his residence, gives himself over to the celebration of the Divine Office effects, even when there may be no one who is accompanying him, an act which is eminently ecclesial in the name of the Church and in favor of all the Church, and inclusive of all humanity. The Roman Pontifical reads: 'Are you resolved to maintain and deepen a spirit of prayer appropriate to your way of life and, in keeping with what is required of you, to celebrate faithfully the *Liturgy of the Hours* for the Church and for the whole world?' (Cf. *Roman Pontifical*, Rite of the Ordination of Deacons).

"Thus, in the same rite of diaconal ordination, the sacred minister asks for and receives from the Church the mandate of the recitation of the *Liturgy of the Hours*, which mandate pertains, therefore, to the orbit of ministerial responsibilities of the ordained, and goes beyond that of his

personal piety. Sacred ministers, along with the Bishops, find themselves joined in the ministry of intercession for the People of God who have been entrusted to them, as they were to Moses (Ex 17, 8-16), to the Apostles (1 Tim 2, 1-6) and to the same Jesus Christ 'who is at the right hand of the Father and intercedes for us' (Rom 8, 34). Similarly, the General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours, no. 108 states: "Those who pray the psalms in the liturgy of the hours do so not so much in their own name as in the name of the entire Body of Christ."

The response adds some further historical and canonical background. It then addresses the central question of the obligation of the liturgy of the hours:

"Question #1: What is the mind of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments regarding the extension of the obligation of celebration or reciting daily the *Liturgy of the Hours*?

"Response: Those who have been ordained are morally bound, in virtue of the same ordination they have received, to the celebration or the entire and daily recitation of the Divine Office such as is canonically established in canon 276, § 2, n. 3 of the CIC, cited previously. This recitation does not have for its part the nature of a private devotion or of a pious exercise realized by the personal will alone of the cleric but rather is an act proper to the sacred ministry and pastoral office.

"Question #2: Is the obligation *sub gravi* extended to the entire recitation of the Divine Office?

"Response: The following must be kept in mind:

"A serious reason, be it of health, or of pastoral service in ministry, or of an act of charity, or of fatigue, not a simple inconvenience, may excuse the partial recitation and even the entire Divine Office, according to the general principle that establishes that a mere ecclesiastical law does not bind when a serious inconvenience is present;

"The total or partial omission of the Office due to laziness alone or due to the performance of activities of unnecessary diversion, is not licit, and even more so, constitutes an underestimation, according to the gravity of the matter, of the ministerial office and of the positive law of the Church;

"To omit the Hours of Morning Prayer (Lauds) and Evening Prayer (Vespers) requires a greater reason still, given that these Hours are the 'double hinge of the daily Office' (SC 89);

"If a priest must celebrate Mass several times on the same day or hear confessions for several hours or preach several times on the same day, and this causes him fatigue, he may consider, with tranquility of conscience, that he has a legitimate excuse for omitting a proportionate part of the Office;

"The proper Ordinary of the priest or deacon can, for a just or serious reason, according to the case, dispense him totally or partially from the recitation of the Divine Office, or commute it to another act of piety (as, for example, the Holy Rosary, the Stations of the Cross, a biblical or spiritual reading, a time of mental prayer reasonably prolonged, etc.).

"Question: What role does the criterion of '*veritas temporis*' (correspondence to time of day) play concerning this question?

"Response: The answer must be given in parts, to clarify the diverse cases.

"The 'Office of Readings' does not have a strict time assigned, and may be celebrated at any hour, and it can be omitted if there exists one of the reasons signalled out in the answer indicated under number 2 above. According to custom, the Office of Readings may be celebrated any time

beginning with the evening hours or night time hours of the previous day, after Evening Prayer (Vespers) (Cf. GILH, 59).

"The same holds true for the 'intermediate hours,' which, nevertheless, have no set time for their celebration. For their recitation, the time that intervenes between morning and afternoon should be observed. Outside of choir, of the three hours, Mid-Morning Prayer (Tertia), Mid-Day Prayer (Sexta), and Mid-Afternoon Prayer (Nona), it is fitting to select one of these three, the one that more easily corresponds to the time of day, so that the tradition of praying during the day, in the midst of working, be maintained (Cf. GILH, 77).

"By itself, Morning Prayer (Lauds) should be recited during the morning hours and Evening Prayer (Vespers) during the evening hours, as the names of these parts of the Office indicate. If someone cannot recite Morning Prayer (Lauds) in the morning, he has the obligation of reciting it as soon thereafter as possible. In the same way, if Evening Prayer (Vespers) cannot be recited during the evening hours, it must be recited as soon thereafter as possible (SC 89). In other words, the obstacle, which impedes the observation of the 'true time of the hours', is not by itself a cause that excuses the recitation either of Morning Prayer (Lauds) or of Evening Prayer (Vespers), because it is a question of the 'Principal Hours' (SC, 89) which 'merit the greatest esteem' (GILH, 40).

"Whoever willingly recites the *Liturgy of the Hours* and endeavors to celebrate the praises of the Creator of the universe with dedication, can at least recite the psalmody of the hour that has been omitted without the hymn and conclude with only a short reading and the prayer."