

The Services of Matins and Hours
ReCatechism 4
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In the worship of the Orthodox Church, all services are separated into three sections:

Sacraments (Gr. *Μυστήρια*) are services that have a specific part where the Holy Spirit is invoked to bless the people present and, at times, certain gifts offered. They are necessary for the existence of the Church and for our salvation, bringing us closer to God. In the Orthodox Church today, the Sacraments are:

1. Baptism (Μυστήριον του Βαπτίσματος)
2. Chrismation (Μυστήριον του Χρίσματος)
3. Holy Eucharist/Holy Communion (Μυστήριον της Θείας Ευχαριστήριας / Θείας Κοινωνίας)
4. Repentance and Confession (Μυστήριον της Εξομολογήσεως)
5. Holy Orders/Ordination (Μυστήριον της Χειροτονίας)
6. Marriage (Μυστήριον του Γάμου)
7. Holy Unction (Μυστήριον του Ευελαίου)

Other services that are not “sacraments” per se, but where the Church asks for the invocation of the Holy Spirit are called *Sacramental Blessings* (Gr. *Αγιαστικές Τελετές*). These include both complete services and simple prayers.

The final category of services is the so-called *Offices* (Gr. *Ακολουθίες*). These services are common prayers that are usually (but not always) chanted in the Church and can be prayed without a priest, if one is not available. They include:

- Vespers (Εσπερινός)*
- Compline (Απόδειπνος)*
- Midnight Office (Μεσονυκτικό) *
- Matins (Ορθρος)*
- 1st, 3rd, 6th and 9th Hours (Α', Γ', Στ' και Θ' Ώρες)*
- Akathist Hymns (Ακάθιστοι Ύμνοι) +
- Supplicatory Canons (Παρακλητικοί Κανόνες) +
- The Holy Cross Services (Ακολουθίες του Τιμίου Σταυρού) +

* - *Services can be celebrated daily*

+ - *Services can be celebrated periodically*

The purpose of this session is to explain the Matins and Hours services. To understand these Offices, one must understand their respective themes, progression throughout history, differences between the two types of rites (i.e. monastic and Cathedral) and significance in our lives.

“Meet You at the Church” – Themes

Like any service, the Matins and Hours services have various themes.

The first theme of Matins is that of “the Fall” of Adam (cf. Gen. 3). It’s true that, “when we first wake up, the initial sensation is always that of night, not of illumination...” (*For the Life of the World*, 63) This remembrance of the Fall reminds us that we live in a sinful reality – the world as a place where sin exists because of the Fall; therefore, we must be watchful throughout the day in order for us not to fall as Adam did when he sinned. This theme is generally lost today, as Matins usually begins when the sun has already risen.

Along with this theme of “the Fall”, so too we remember that Light has dawned in the world through Jesus Christ, “the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” (Jn. 1:9) Therefore, the Matins service guides the believer from the Fall to Illumination. “The Church announces every morning that God is the Lord, and she begins to organize life around God... Matins refers morning to the Christian experience of the Church as ‘morning’, as ‘beginning’.” (*Ibid*, 63-64)

On feast days, Matins also has a theme centred around the feast celebrated (either of the Lord, the Theotokos, a particular Saint or event in the history of the Church).

In terms of the Hours services: **The First Hour** meditates on the theme of Creation, the banishment of Adam and Eve from Paradise and the appearance of Christ before Caiaphas. **The Third Hour** meditates on the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, as it happened “at the third hour” (Acts 2:15). We also find prayers for assistance and protection in our battle against the evil one, along with prayers of repentance. **The Sixth Hour** meditates on the Crucifixion of our Lord, which happened at this hour (see Luke 23:34), thus finding a clash between the bitterness brought on by the evil one and his minions and the expression of hope in God. **The Ninth Hour** has as its epicentre the death of Christ on the Cross, as Mark 15:33-41 testifies. During this hour, we hear prayers of thanksgiving to Christ for saving the world through His sacrifice on the Cross.

As with Matins, the Hours also maintains a festal character the day before the main day of the feast (for example, the Hours of December 24th will have a Christmas theme).

As for “regular days” (i.e. when no ‘great feast’ is celebrated), there are daily themes and saints that are celebrated.

Sunday: The Resurrection of our Lord

Monday: The Bodiless Powers (Angels, Archangels, Cherubim, Seraphim, etc.)

Tuesday: St. John the Baptist

Wednesday: The Theotokos

Thursday: The Holy 12 Apostles (and St. Nicholas)

Friday: The Crucifixion of our Lord

Saturday: The Souls (i.e. those who have passed away)

A Historical Journey

From very early on in the Church, *the Liturgical Day* begins in the evening and concluded the next evening (and not the 12 midnight to 12 midnight cycle we have today). Therefore, the Church would have its daily cycle start at Vespers and conclude with the 9th Hour. The chart below helps one understand the “Byzantine Clock” in comparison with our own:

The Modern vs. Byzantine “Clocks”

Modern Clock	“Byzantine Clock” (Liturgical time)	Services for the Monastic Rite	Services done @ Agion Oros today	Services done @ our Church
6 p.m. (Sun set)	1 st Hour of the night	Vespers	Vespers	Vespers/Apodeipno
9 p.m.	3 rd Hour of the night	Apodeipno	Apodeipnon	--
12 a.m.	6 th Hour of the night	Mesonyktion	--	--
3 a.m.	9 th Hour of the night	--	Mesonyktion, Orthros, 1 st Hour, and Holy Eucharist	--
6 a.m.	1 st Hour of the day	Orthros	--	--
9 a.m.	3 rd Hour of the day	3 rd Hour	--	Orthros and Holy Eucharist
12 noon	6 th Hour of the day	6 th Hour	3 rd , 6 th & 9 th Hrs.*	--
3 p.m.	9 th Hour	9 th Hour	--	--

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* *On Mount Athos, services at this time could also be done at 3 p.m.*

Both the services of Matins and the Hours were (and continue to be) celebrated differently in Parishes and Monasteries.

The Cathedral Rite – Parishes

In most parishes, *Matins* is the first service to be performed in the morning. From the beginning until today, **the Cathedral Rite** encourages the practice of the congregation chanting hymns together (called *antiphonal chanting*). We see examples of this during the chants “God is the Lord” (Θεός Κύριος) and the Magnificat (Η Τιμωτέρα). In the beginning, lay participation was much more apparent during the service of Matins, as compared to today. In regards to the Hours, it is usually held in Carpathorussian Orthodox Churches on Sunday mornings before the Divine Liturgy (instead of Matins). It was not something the Cathedral rite laid particular emphasis on, being a service that was exclusively for Monasteries.

In **the Monastic Rite**, Monasteries perform the Midnight Office either at midnight or right before Matins begins. Matins is celebrated before the Divine Liturgy. If no Divine Liturgy is to be held, the Hours are held later on in the day. The 9th Hour is usually held in the “Catholikon” (i.e. the main church) of the Monastery, while the other Hours might be prayed privately or at another part of the Monastery.

At first, **the Monastic Rite** discouraged (or, in some cases, forbade) monks, nuns and others to chant. Hymns and psalms were read, rather than chanted. The overall mood was one of **contemplation**, rather than of communal (or *antiphonal*) chanting.

The Problems of these services today

One can identify three main problems for these services today:

- a. **Scarce Participation**
- b. **Involvement from the Laity**
- c. **Language barriers**

- a. **Scarce Participation**: As Matins is usually the first service of the day, it is a service many people have never been to (except for Holy Week and Pascha – *more on that later*). It usually begins at about 8:45 a.m. Many people simply see it as a precursor for the Divine Liturgy and, as both services take approximately 2 ½ to 3 hours to complete, the laity have the idea that “we can miss this service – it’s all the same, anyway.”
 - **Thoughts**: This is a *morning* service with its own particular themes for the faithful. The Divine Liturgy has its own themes and sections (such as thanksgiving to God, Scriptural readings, sermon, reception of Holy Communion) that cannot be ‘celebrated’ during Matins. We do not remember the Saint(s) celebrated during the Liturgy, except for their

hymn (“Apolytikion”) being chanted after the Small Entrance. In the final analysis, this can only change if the mentality “it’s ok to miss Matins” stops.

- b. **Involvement from the Laity**: There are very few things that are antiphonally chanted in Matins. As there are many things that have been brought over from the “Monastic Rite”, with the chants not being familiar, along with an overall mood to remain “contemplative” during the Divine Services, it limits lay participation in the service.
- **Thoughts**: This is why the Church needs to train new chanters and choirs, offering them the knowledge they need to continue this service. Otherwise, it will only be done at Monasteries. Lay participation in any service is vital for a vibrant Church community. No lay participation in the worship of the Church (and simply leaving things to the chanter/choir) deprives one of the full experience they can have while worshipping. If *lex orandi est lex credendi* (“the law of prayer is the law of belief”), this needs to become a priority for believers, as well. Otherwise, the effect of the services in regards to one’s spiritual life will become non-existent.
- c. **Language Barriers**: The language used in most Churches for Matins is the native language of the parish (Greek, Russian, Serbian, etc.). In the case of liturgical Greek and/or Church Slavonic, a layperson normally *cannot understand* what is being said; therefore, they choose to ‘skip the service’ because they cannot “connect” with the deep theology (“it sounds good, but I don’t understand a word they’re saying”).
- **Thoughts**: There are many sites available online that offer English translations for the Matins services of Sundays and great feasts, such as “St. Gregory Palamas e-Matins site”. *Holy Transfiguration Monastery* also sells all the books of Matins (movable and immovable feastdays), which a Church can use for their faithful. At our Church, the chanters tend to put at least 30-40% English when they see youth, young adults or non-Greeks attending our services. It is important to know *what* we are praying; otherwise, we are just ‘hearing an opera’ (as one priest put it) and not appreciating the prayers and hymns which Matins offers us.

Interesting Structure

Matins can be a confusing service if one does not know the basic structure.

It begins with the *Enarxis*, which consists of the Trisagion Prayers, hymns and a short litany. This *enarxis* was originally for the entrance; therefore, this part is not necessary.

The Priest’s exclamation: “Glory to the holy, consubstantial, life-giving and undivided Trinity, both now and forevermore!” is the official “beginning” of Matins. The “Exapsalmos” (or *Six Psalms*) is then read, followed by the “Litany of Peace”.

Verses 27a and 26a of Psalm 117 are then chanted (“God is the Lord and has revealed Himself to us...”) on weekdays and Sundays, emphasizing the theme of Illumination. On regular Saturdays (and at the beginning of Holy Week), the “Alleluia” is chanted, as it is a more sombre hymn. Throughout the Saturday Matins service, hymns are included that have a more sombre tone to them, as this Matins is mostly centred around praying for those who have passed away (which is why **memorials/μνημόσυνα need to be done on Saturdays, and not on Sundays**).

The “apolytikia” are then chanted, which are the main hymns of the day (and are usually known by the people).

After a short litany by the Priest, the “Kathismata” are sung. In the Byzantine Church (which had no pews in their Churches), this was the time the clergy would tell people to be seated. They are “contemplative hymns” and difficult to chant.

The “Anavathmi” or “Hymns of Ascent” are usually taken from the Old Testament. They are sometimes difficult to chant because they are uncommon.

If there is a Gospel reading for Matins, it would be said at this moment. If on a feastday, it usually reflects the character of the feast (e.g. Mark 1:9-11 is read for the feast of Theophany). On Sundays, the Gospel reflects the Resurrection. The eleven Gospel readings for Sundays (or *Eothina*) are:

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|---------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Matthew 28:16-20 | 5. Luke 24:12-35 | 9. John 20:19-31 |
| 2. Mark 16:1-8 | 6. Luke 24:36-53 | 10. John 21:1-14 |
| 3. Mark 16:9-20 | 7. John 20:1-10 | 11. John 21:15-25 |
| 4. Luke 24:1-12 | 8. John 20:11-18 | |

In keeping with the theme of repentance, Psalm 50 (one of the oldest parts of Matins) is read.

The *Synaxarion*, which is a short reading on the Saints of the day, is read aloud for people to hear *who is being celebrated*, followed by the chanting of the *Katavasiae*, hymns for a particular liturgical period (e.g. from November 21st to December 31st, the Christmas *Katavasiae* are chanted). Between the 8th and 9th *katavasia*, the “Magnificat” is chanted (the hymn of the Virgin Mary found in Luke 1:46-55) with the refrain, “More honourable than the Cherubim...” (Τὴν Τιμιωτέραν τῶν Χερουβείμ).

The *Exaposteilaria* are then chanted, which is a summary of the Saint’s life or, on Sundays, a summary of the *Eothinon* Gospel reading.

The *Lauds* or *Praises* (Gr. Αἶνοι) begin with the chanting of Psalm 148:1-2 and 4-8 hymns about the feast. The final *Doxastikon* would be chanted with a more detailed hymn about the feast, along with a hymn of praise to the Theotokos.

Note: Monasteries would chant Psalm 148, 149 and 150, whereas parishes simply say the first two verses of Psalm 148 and then go right to the last verses of Psalm 150.

After the *Doxology* and the main hymn of the day (or, “Today salvation has come to the world...” for Sundays), the Divine Liturgy begins. If no Liturgy is to be celebrated, Matins concludes with a dismissal.

Drastic differences in Matins occur during **Holy Week** (where Matins is chanted as it would be at a monastery – hence the very ‘contemplative’ style of Holy Week, rather than the antiphonal chanting) and on **Pascha** (where the chanting is much more simple

and direct, as it details the Resurrection of Christ). *Go to the “Map of Matins” for a more analytical view of the service, celebrated at different times of the year.*

In regards to the **Hours**, the **regular** Hours are simple and only read (with no chanting, as to be expected from a monastic service). The Hours done during **Lent** are more sombre and have a Lenten character to them, whereas the Hours of **Pascha** are very short and only centre around the Paschal Feast. Usually, parishes celebrate “**The Royal Hours**” services, which are said on *Christmas Eve*, *Theophany Eve* and *Good Friday*. They are very elaborate services with much chanting emphasizing the upcoming feast.

The structure for any type of Hours service (except the Hours of Pascha, which are very unique) begins with the *Trisagion*, followed by Psalms (related to the theme of each hour), hymns of the Saints celebrated, other prayers, a specific Prayer of the Hour and the Dismissal.

No Priest? No problem!

As with any “Office”, Matins and the Hours services can be prayed without a Priest. During the Priest’s parts, the eldest in seniority of the low order clergy (e.g. a chanter, reader, etc.) or – if there are none present – the eldest person attending simply says, “Through the prayers of our holy fathers...” («Δι’ευχών των αγίων πατέρων ημών...») and continues with the service. No parts of the priest (petitions, exclamations, gospel readings, etc.) are said by the faithful – only the parts that are designated for the chanter and/or reader.

Having said the above, this does not “excuse” anyone from not attending the divine services when a priest is present. This is used only in situations where there is no priest attending (e.g. an emergency, snowstorm, etc.).

Significance

Both Matins and the Hours prepare us spiritually for the upcoming feasts, keeping us spiritually grounded and helping us follow to St. Paul’s command: “pray without ceasing” («αδιαλείπτως προσεύχεσθαι» – 1 Thes. 5:17). The services show us that prayer is not a stagnant event, simply done when we come to Church during the prescribed times on a parish bulletin. Whether in a parish or monastery, the celebration of Saints and their services teach faithful both about the amazing lives of the Saints and the overall theology of the Church.

Going to Matins (and, when celebrated, the Hours) is a way for us to spiritually prepare for the Divine Liturgy, helping us appreciate God’s creation, the “new life in Christ” and the feast we celebrate.