

## Origin Story of Morning Prayer of the Church

I want to tell you a long and very beautiful story. It is the origin story of the Morning Prayer we pray together each morning before weekday Mass. Even then, this is only a high-level view of the complete story.

It all begins with God.

In the desert when the people of Israel had escaped Pharaoh by God's mighty hand, He took them to Mount Sinai and began to speak to them, but they begged Him to stop because the revelation of His holiness and power filled them with fear and awe. However Moses was different because He had been experiencing various forms of the presence and power of God since the time of the burning bush. So the people begged Moses to be their intermediary in establishing God's covenant and in learning His decrees for how they were to live.

(Read Exodus chapters 19 and 20.)

God then begins to give very detailed instructions to Moses.

These are some of them:

*Leviticus 24:1-4 The Lord God spoke to Moses; He said: 'Order the sons of Israel to bring you pure olive oil for the lamp-stand, and keep a flame burning there continually. Outside the veil of the Testimony, in the Tent of Meeting, Aaron is to see to this flame. It shall burn there before the Lord God from evening to morning continually. This is a perpetual law for your descendants: Aaron is to see to the lamps on the pure lampstand before the Lord God, continually.*

But there's more:

*Exodus 30:7-8 Aaron must burn fragrant incense each morning when he trims the lamps, and between the two evenings, when Aaron puts the lamps back, he must burn it again. You must make these offerings of incense before the Lord God unfailingly from generation to generation.*

It is rather emphatic stuff, isn't it? It is also why we keep a sanctuary lamp burning near every tabernacle where the Blessed Eucharist resides.



There were also detailed instructions from God about which tribes of Israel would encamp to the north of the Tent of Meeting, to the east of the Tent of Meeting, to the south of the Tent of Meeting, and to the west of the Tent of Meeting – as well as the order in which the tribes of Israel would march whenever God told them to move. Always, either at rest or on the move, the Tent of Meeting was in the middle. (Read Numbers Chapter 2.)

This means that whenever the incense was burned before God at morning and evening, all Israel was close enough to smell it and to know what it meant. In the camp the smell of that incense would be enough for each person to stop and honour what was happening and to be encouraged that God was still with them.

There are several mentions of this trimming of the lamps and offering incense throughout the bible.

*1 Samuel 3:3 The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying in the sanctuary of the Lord God where the ark of God was.*

*Numbers 8:2 Say this to Aaron, ‘When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps must throw light towards the front of the lampstand.*

*2 Chronicles 13:11 Every morning, every evening, we burn holocausts to the Lord our God; we have the incense of sweet spices, the loaves set out in rows on the pure table, the golden lampstand with its lamps that are to burn each evening; for we observe the ritual of the Lord our God, but you have abandoned Him.*

Notice how early this rhythm of morning and evening prayer began, and how it is supposed to be perpetual.

It is also mentioned in the New Testament, Luke 1: 8-10 *Now it was the turn of Zechariah’s section to serve, and he was exercising his priestly office before God when it fell to him by lot, as the ritual custom was, to enter the Lord’s sanctuary and burn incense there. And at the hour of incense the whole congregation was outside, praying.*

It is always salutary to read Numbers 16 and 17, and I invite you to read them to get the full context. The shorter version is that many of the non-priest levites got jealous of the priesthood of Aaron and his sons. So God sorted that out in a most dramatic and emphatic way, but the people grumbled and immediately a plague broke out among them. But Moses knew what to do.

*Numbers 17:11-13 Then Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take the censer, fill it with fire from the altar, put incense in it and hurry to the community to perform the rite of atonement over them. The wrath has come down from the Lord God and the plague has begun’. Aaron did as Moses said and ran among the assembly, but the plague was already at work among them. He put in the incense and performed the rite of atonement over the people. Then he stood between the living and the dead, and the plague stopped.*

Notice that Aaron ran out, in his heart he was seeking mercy from God for all Israel, and that the smoke from the incense certainly did not distinguish between the living and the dead. Right here

therefore is the very first hint that praying for both the living and the dead is acceptable to God. Even today all Jewish people offer prayers for the dead. So do all Catholics.



Now how long do you think it took to enter at a dignified pace, set the incense burning before God, and to either snuff out and refill or to successfully light seven lamps and then exit at a dignified pace? There's good evidence that it took around 10 minutes.

But it will take a little while to show you that this is so.

While all Israel was wandering around the desert for 40 years, it was easy to pray during the time of incense because everyone was close enough to smell it. But then they entered the promised land and spread out tribe by tribe throughout the territory of Israel from Dan to Beersheba. But now it wasn't so easy. So the practice of the *minyan* developed, and is still practiced today. I invite you to look up the Wikipedia for Minyan, and any link that comes up associated with a website called [myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com).

At first the motivation would have been, how do I attract God's blessing and protection upon my family and neighbourhood in good times and in bad? What did God say to Abraham? If the town contains ten good men, I will not destroy it. (c.f. Genesis 18:32)

How do you make sure you've got ten good men? You make it a regular practice for them to pray together.

That's what a minyan is. It is a group of ten men or more who have made their bah mitzvah, and together they pray regular daily prayers at morning and evening, prayers for mourning known as the Kaddish, special Sabbath prayers, and similar. Unless you have a quorum of those 10 bar mitzvahed men, you can't do the prayers. Everyone else can join in with the responses - as long as those 10 men are present. Guess how long those morning and evening minyan prayers are? Around 10 minutes. What does it consist of? According to what I have been able to glean from the internet: set prayers asking for regular needs, blessings, praises, thanksgivings, passages from the psalms, the Shema prayer and penitential prayers, and maybe a short reading from one of the first five books of the bible known collectively as the Torah.

To make sure it is always done properly they use hand held prayer books. Some parts are mandatory, some parts are optional. The prayers are much longer if they are part of an official mourning ritual. It is prayed standing up in an ordered kind of way, all facing east, the direction of Jerusalem.

For far more detail, visit <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/shaharit-minhah-and-maariv/> and also watch the 3 minute video there.



At this point I hope the similarities between the traditional minyan morning and evening prayer and the morning prayer we pray before weekday Mass are pinging in your brain.

Remember in the passage from Luke referred to above that while Zechariah was burning incense the whole congregation was outside praying? Congregation is bible code for minyan. Congregation can refer to all the children of Israel, but also to minyan, which is the most common way for Jewish people to gather together for prayer when they are nowhere near a synagogue.

That's how we know about how long the incense ritual was.

Have you noticed that when we pray morning prayer before weekday Mass, that it takes around 10 minutes and never more than 15 minutes when it is said? If it is sung it takes about 30 mins.



Jesus chose 12 men to be His Apostles and they represent the 12 tribes of Israel. But having more than 10 men also means that you could have one of them cooking breakfast and another off on a task, and still have enough men to pray the minyan prayers together every morning and every evening.

We generally translate Leviticus 22:32 as *'You must not profane My holy Name, so that I may be proclaimed holy among the sons of Israel. I, the Lord God, Who sanctify you'*.

The Babylonian Talmud translates it as *'And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel'* a past and future promise and declaration.

Now we turn to the Gospel of John and the resurrection. Prepare for your minds to be blown.

*John 20:19 In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them.*

What were they doing standing up in the evening? Praying evening prayer as a minyan. And Jesus joins in just as He had done throughout His public ministry.

*John 20:26 Eight days later the disciples were in the house again and Thomas was with them. The doors were closed, but Jesus came in and stood among them.*

What were they doing standing up? Praying either morning or evening prayer, the text isn't specific.

Many translations have 'stood in the midst of them' instead of 'stood among them'.

This is a direct fulfillment of Leviticus 22:32.

Whenever we pray the morning prayer or evening prayer of the Church, Jesus is with us.

We pray it with Him, He prays it with us, He prays it in and through us. We pray it in union with the whole church both in time and in eternity.

*Acts 2:42 These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.*

Which prayers? The morning and evening minyan prayers.





Over time those minyan prayers gradually took on a Christian character, for example the Shema ('Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the one Lord...') was replaced by the 'Our Father'.

What we pray at morning prayer before weekday Mass is the modern-day Christian form of the Jewish minyan morning prayers, it has its ultimate roots grounded in what God directed Moses for part of the daily ritual of priestly worship. It is illuminated by the Resurrection and by Pentecost. Similarly it has a flavour of praise in the morning and thanksgiving in the evening. Because it is public worship of God, (even if it is prayed alone in silence), it is mandatory for priests and religious, but highly recommended for the rest of us.

Morning prayer and evening prayer are the hinges of the full liturgy of the hours. It is classified as liturgy and not as devotion, just as Holy Mass is classified as liturgy and not as devotion.



Before the advent of the Cistercian branch of the Benedictine order, every religious without exception took part in morning and evening prayer and the other liturgical hours. But the Cistercians began an innovation due to their desire for silence and self-sufficiency. They permitted their religious to be not only choir religious but also lay religious. It meant that those who could not read nor write were no longer excluded from religious life and that they could do a lot of time-consuming farm work. Instead of the 150 psalms that the choir religious prayed as the basis of the liturgy of the hours, the lay religious were given an Our Father per psalm.

So how do you make sure you got the whole 150 Our Father's prayed? Some bright spark decided to put knots in a length of rope. Over time it was found that groups of ten knots together were very helpful. And by the time of St Dominic an embryonic form of the rosary was in use, 15 decades with an Our Father and 10 Hail Marys, then meditations on the mysteries of Jesus and Mary, add some Glory Bes, a Creed and a Hail Holy Queen, and three rosaries for lay religious replacing the liturgy of the hours for the choir religious became the norm. St Dominic under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the visitation of Mary then took the rosary to all lay people everywhere.

The Liturgy of the Hours and the Rosary both have the same venerable origin, and they should never be in competition with each other. It is another of those both/and things and never only this or only that.

I told you it was going to be a long and beautiful story.



Hopefully knowing the basics of the story will help you appreciate morning prayer prior to weekday Mass in a whole new way; and also to begin to discover the true depth of the intercessory prayer available when we pray it together physically, but at the same time, truly united with Jesus and with the whole Church throughout the world - and also throughout time.



Notes:

Images used were found using search terms on the internet or own photograph (Office Books).

The full Liturgy of the Hours begins with the Office of Readings, then Morning Prayer (sometimes called Lauds), mid-morning prayer, midday prayer, mid-afternoon prayer, Evening Prayer (sometimes called Vespers) and Night Prayer (sometimes called Compline).

If you would like to gradually build your participation in the Liturgy of the Hours, after Morning Prayer then add Evening Prayer, and then add Night Prayer (5 mins) and then anything else as you feel led from God. The Office of Readings includes psalms, a sizeable portion from one of the books of the bible, and a reading from or about one of the Saints – else from Vatican II.