

## **Basil on Prayer**

Saint Basil the Great gives us several insights on prayer. He was a man of prayer par excellence. Everything he did he did out of prayer. Even though he was an active public figure he was also grounded in monastic practices of silence and prayer. He is even credited with establishing the monastic rules which are followed to this day. But above all, he was a pastor to his people, so we cannot think of his writings as being written only for those who choose a monastic life. For him the monastic life prepared him for an active public life and embodied practices that are useful to us all.

The following are eleven excerpts from his works where he spoke about prayer.

1. In this first one saint Basil in likening prayer to our intake of food as something that is fundamental to our well being. We need to resist the bodily desires for activities other than prayer when our time for prayer comes.

*Whenever you are summoned to prayer, let your voice respond and remain at an exercise of rule until the prayers are finished, regarding failure in this respect as a great loss. When you take food to nourish your body, you can scarcely be induced to leave the table before you have fully satisfied your need and, except for an urgent reason, you will not readily do so. How much more eagerly ought you to linger over spiritual nourishment and strengthen your soul with prayer; for the soul is as far superior to the body as heaven is above the earth and -heavenly things above those of earth.*

*The soul is an image of heaven because the Lord dwells within it, but the flesh is of earth, wherein live mortal men and irrational beasts. Regulate the needs of your body, therefore, in conformity with the hours of prayer and be prepared to dismiss arguments which would draw you away from observance of the rule; for it is the way of the devils to urge us to be absent during the time of prayer on the pretext of a seemingly worthy reason, so that they may plausibly draw us away from saving prayer. Do not make excuses, saying, 'Alas, my head! Alas, my stomach!' alleging invisible proofs of nonexistent pain and relaxing the rigor of the vigil for the sake of taking rest. Rather, be constant in secret prayer which God beholds in secret and will repay you for openly." Hoard the accruing gains of the most perfect way of life, that in the day of need you may discover hidden wealth.*

Father of Church: On Renunciation of the World p 28-29

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2. In this second excerpt Saint Basil gives us a summation of what Scripture teaches us about prayer. The following is taken from his rule 56 in his book on Morals.

About Prayer

**a. We should persevere in watching and prayer.**

*Matthew 7:7-8: Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

Luke 18:1-8: *Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"*

Luke 21:34-36: *"But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man."*

Col. 4:2: *"Continue earnestly in prayer, being vigilant in it with thanksgiving..."*

1 Thess. 5:16-17: *"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing..."*

***b. We should give thanks to God even for the daily sustenance required by the body, before we partake of it.***

Matthew 14:19: *Then He commanded the multitudes to sit down on the grass. And He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitudes.*

Acts 27:35: *And when he had said these things, he took bread and gave thanks to God in the presence of them all; and when he had broken it he began to eat.*

1 Tim. 4:4: *For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving...*

***c. We should not recite long and repetitious prayers for things that are perishable and unworthy of the Lord.***

Matthew 6:7-8: *And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do. For they think that they will be heard for their many words. Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.*

Luke 12:29-30: *And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things.*

***d. How we should pray, and with what dispositions of soul.***

Matthew 6:9-10: *In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven...*

Matthew 6:33: *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.*

Mark 11:25: *And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*

1 Tim. 2:8: *I desire therefore that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting...*

**e. That we should pray for one another and for those who are preachers of the Word of Truth.**

Luke 22:31-32: *And the Lord said, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren."*

Eph 6:18-20: *Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.*

2 Thess 3:1: *Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run swiftly and be glorified, just as it is with you...*

**f. That we should pray even for our enemies.**

Matthew [5.44,45]: 'Pray for them that persecute and calumniate you, that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven.'

**g. That no man ought to pray or prophesy with his head covered; and no woman, with uncovered head.**

1 Cor. 11:3-5: But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved.

Father of the Church: *Morals* pp138-140

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3. The third excerpt is about the schedule of prayer and how it should permeate one's entire life. This is taken from "An Ascetical Discourse."

*Prayer time should cover the whole of life, but since there is absolute need at certain intervals to interrupt the bending of the knee and the chanting of psalms, the hours appointed for prayer by the saints should be observed. The mighty David says: "At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You, because of Your righteous judgments" (Ps 118(119):62); and we find Paul and Silas following his example, for they praised God in prison at midnight (Acts 16:25). Then too, the same Prophet says: "Evening and morning and at noon"(Ps 54(55):17). Moreover, the coming of the Holy Spirit took place at the third hour, as we learn in the Acts when, in answer to the Pharisees who were jeering at the disciples because of the diversity of tongues, Peter said that they were not drunk who were speaking these words: "since it is only the third hour of the day"(Acts 2:15). Again, the ninth hour recalls the Lord's Passion, which took place that we might live (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33-34). But, since David says: "Seven times a day I praise You, because of Your righteous judgments (Psalm 118(119):164), and the times for prayer which have been mentioned do not make up this seven-fold apportionment, the*

*mid-day prayer should be divided, one part being recited before the noon repast and the other afterward. In this way, the daily seven-fold praise of God distributed throughout the whole period of the day may become a pattern for us also.*

Church Fathers: An Ascetical Discourse pp 212-213

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4. The fourth excerpt is about the relationship of work and prayer. He is addressing the criticism that prayer takes away from work or work from prayer. He shows how there is no conflict between work and prayer. This is taken from his Long Rule written for guidance of monastics.

The question being addressed is "Whether prayer and psalmody ought to afford a pretext for neglecting our work, what hours are suitable for prayer, and, above all, whether labor is necessary." Saint Basil's response is as follows:

*Our Lord Jesus Christ says: "He is worthy"—not everyone without exception or anyone at all, but "a worker is worthy of his food" (Matt 5:10:10), and the Apostle bids us labor and work with our own hands the things which are good, that we may have something to give to him that suffereth need (Eph 4:28). It is, therefore, immediately obvious that we must toil with diligence and not think that our goal of piety offers an escape from work or a pretext for idleness, but occasion for struggle, for ever greater endeavor, and for patience in tribulation, so that we may be able to say: "in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often" (2Cor 11:27). Not only is such exertion beneficial for bringing the body into subjection, but also for showing charity to our neighbor in order that through us God may grant sufficiency to the weak among our brethren, according to the example given by the Apostle in the Acts when he says: "I have shown you in every way, by laboring like this, that you must support the weak" (Acts 20:35), and again: "that he may have something to give him who has need" (Eph 4:28). Thus we may be accounted worthy to hear the words: "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink;" (Matt 25:34-35).*

*But why should we dwell upon the amount of evil there is in idleness, when the Apostle clearly prescribes that he who does not work should not eat (2Thess 3:10). As daily sustenance is necessary for everyone, so labor in proportion to one's strength is also essential. Not vainly has Solomon written in praise: "she watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness" (Prov 31:27). And again, the Apostle says of himself: "nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day" (2 Thess 3:8); yet, since he was preaching the Gospel, he was entitled to receive his livelihood from the Gospel. The Lord couples sloth with wickedness, saying: "You wicked and lazy servant" (Matt 25:26). Wise Solomon, also, praises the laborer not only in the words already quoted, but also, in rebuking the sluggard, associating him by contrast with the tiniest of insects: "Go to the ant, you*

*sluggard!" (Prov 6:6). We have reason to fear, therefore, lest, perchance, on the day of judgment this fault also may be alleged against us, since He who has endowed us with the ability to work demands that our labor be proportioned to our capacity; for He says: "to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48). Moreover, because some use prayer and psalmody as an excuse for neglecting their work, it is necessary to bear in mind that for certain other tasks a particular time is allotted, according to the words of Ecclesiastes: "To everything there is a season" (Eccl 3:1). For prayer and psalmody, however, as also, indeed, for some other duties, every hour is suitable, that, while our hands are busy at their tasks, we may praise God sometimes with the tongue (when this is possible or, rather, when it is conducive to edification); or, if not, with the heart, at least, in psalms, hymns and spiritual canticles, as it is written (Col 3:16). Thus, in the midst of our work can we fulfill the duty of prayer, giving thanks to Him who has granted strength to our hands for performing our tasks and cleverness to our minds for acquiring knowledge, and for having provided the materials, both that which is in the instruments we use and that which forms the matter of the arts in which we may be engaged, praying that the work of our hands may be directed toward its goal, the good pleasure of God.*

*Thus we acquire a recollected spirit-when in every action we beg from God the success of our labors and satisfy our debt of gratitude to Him who gave us the power to do the work, and when, as has been said, we keep before our minds the aim of pleasing Him. If this is not the case, how can there be consistency in the words of the Apostle bidding us to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess 5:17), with those others, "worked with labor and toil night and day" (2 Thess 3:8). Nor, indeed, because thanksgiving at all times has been enjoined even by law and has been proved necessary to our life from both reason and nature, should we therefore be negligent in observing those times for prayer customarily established in communities-times which we have inevitably selected because each period contains a reminder peculiar to itself of blessings received from God. Prayers are recited early in the morning so that the first movements of the soul and the mind may be consecrated to God and that we may take up no other consideration before we have been cheered and heartened by the thought of God, as it is written: "I remembered God and was delighted" (Ps 76(77):4), and that the body may not busy itself with tasks before we have fulfilled the words: "To thee will I pray, O Lord; in the morning thou shalt hear my voice. In the morning I will stand before thee and will see" (Ps 5:4-5). Again at the third hour the brethren must assemble and betake themselves to prayer, even if they may have dispersed to their various employments. Recalling to mind the gift of the Spirit bestowed upon the Apostles at this third hour, all should worship together, so that they also may become worthy to receive the gift of sanctity, and they should implore the guidance of the Holy Spirit and His instruction in what is good and useful, according to the words: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit" (Ps 50(51):10-12). Again, it is said elsewhere, "Your Spirit is good. Lead me in the land of uprightness (Ps 142(143):10); and having prayed thus, we should again apply ourselves to our tasks.*

*But, if some, perhaps, are not in attendance because the nature or place of their work keeps them at too great a distance, they are strictly obliged to carry out wherever they are, with promptitude, all that is prescribed for common observance, for 'where there are two or three gathered together in my name,' says the Lord, "there am I in the midst of them" (Matt 18:20). It is also our judgment that prayer is necessary at the sixth hour, in imitation of the saints who say: "Evening and morning and at noon I will speak and declare; and he shall hear my voice" (Ps 54(55):18) And so that we may be saved from invasion and the noonday Devil (Ps 90(91):6), at this time, also, the ninetieth Psalm will be recited. The ninth hour, however, was appointed as a compulsory time for prayer by the Apostles themselves in the Acts where it is related that "Peter and John went up to the temple at the ninth hour of prayer" (Acts 3.1). When the day's work is ended, thanksgiving should be offered for what has been granted us or for what we have done rightly therein and confession made of our omissions whether voluntary or involuntary, or of a secret fault, if we chance to have committed any in words or deeds, or in the heart itself; for by prayer we propitiate God for all our misdemeanors. The examination of our past actions is a great help toward not falling into like faults again; wherefore the Psalmist says: "the things you say in your hearts, be sorry for them upon your beds" (Ps 4:5).*

*Again, at nightfall, we must ask that our rest be sinless and untroubled by dreams. At this hour, also, the ninetieth Psalm should be recited. Paul and Silas, furthermore, have handed down to us the practice of compulsory prayer at midnight, as the history of the Acts declares: "And at midnight Paul and Silas praised God" (Acts 16:25). The Psalmist also says: "I rose at midnight to give praise to thee for the judgments of thy justifications" (Ps 118(119):62). Then, too, we must anticipate the dawn by prayer, so that the day may not find us in slumber and in bcd, according to the words: "My eyes have prevented the morning; that I might meditate on thy words" (Ps 118(119):148). None of these hours for prayer should be unobserved by those who have chosen a life devoted to the glory of God and His Christ. Moreover, I think that variety and diversity in the prayers and psalms recited at appointed hours are desirable for the reason that routine and boredom, somehow, often cause distraction in the soul, while by change and variety in the psalmody and prayers said at the stated hours it is refreshed in devotion and renewed in sobriety.*

Church Fathers: The Long Rule pp 306-311

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5. The fifth excerpt is from a letter written to guide one of his disciples.

Prayer is to be commended, for it engenders in the soul a distinct conception of God. And the indwelling of God is this – to have God set firm within oneself through the process of memory. We thus become a temple of God whenever earthly cares cease to interrupt the continuity of our memory of him.

*The Heart of Basilian Spirituality* p 120 Letter 2

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6. The sixth excerpt is taken from a letter to a widow where he is advising the use of prayer.

*Be mindful therefore of God. Keep the fear of Him in your heart, and enlist all men to join with you in your prayers, for great is the aid of them that are able to move God by their importunity. Never cease to do this. Even while we are living this life in the flesh, prayer will be a mighty helper to us, and when we are departing hence it will be a sufficient provision for us on the journey to the world to come.*

*Anxiety is a good thing; but, on the other hand, despondency, dejection, and despair of our salvation, are injurious to the soul. Trust therefore in the goodness of God, and look for His succor, knowing that if we turn to Him rightly and sincerely, not only will He not cast us off forever, but will say to us, even while we are in the act of uttering the words of our prayer, "Lo! I am with you."*

Letter to A Widow

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7. In the seventh excerpt, we have another letter where he address the need for collective prayer.

Letter XCVII

*Truly, from our own bodily constitution, the Lord has taught us the necessity of fellowship. When I look to these my limbs and see that no out of them is self-sufficient, how can I reckon myself competent to discharge the duties of life? One foot could not walk securely without the support of the other; one eye could not see well, were it not for the alliance of the other and for its being able to look at objects in conjunction with it. Hearing is more exact when sound is received through both channels, and the grasp is made firmer by the fellowship of the fingers. In a word, of all that is done by nature and by the will, I see nothing done without the concord of fellow forces. Even prayer, when it is not united prayer, loses its natural strength and the Lord has told us that He will be in the midst where two or three call on Him in concord.*

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8. In this eight excerpt Saint Basil is describing prayer in the worship service.

Letter CCVII

*The customs which now obtain are agreeable to those of all the Churches of God. Among us the people go at night to the house of prayer, and, in distress, affliction, and continual tears, making confession to God, at last rise from their prayers and begin to sing psalms. And now, divided into two parts, they sing antiphonally with one another, thus at once confirming their study of the Gospels, and at the same time producing for themselves a heedful temper and a heart free from distraction. Afterwards they again commit the prelude of the strain to one, and the rest take it up; and so after passing the night in various psalmody, praying at intervals as the day begins to dawn, all together,*

*as with one voice and one heart, raise the psalm of confession to the Lord, each forming for himself his own expressions of penitence.*

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9. The ninth excerpt is taken from his well know treatise *On the Holy Spirit*.

On The Holy Spirit: Chapter XXVII.

*Thus we all look to the at our prayers, but few of us know that we are seeking our own old country,[[Heb. xi. 14,](#)] Paradise, which God planted in Eden in the East.[[Gen. ii. 8.](#)]*

*We pray standing, [The earliest posture of prayer was standing, with the hands extended and raised towards heaven, and with the face turned to the East.] on the first day of the week, but we do not all know the reason. On the day of the resurrection (or “standing again” Grk. ἀνάστασις) we remind ourselves of the grace given to us by standing at prayer, not only because we rose with Christ, and are bound to “seek those things which are above,” but because the day seems to us to be in some sense an image of the age which we expect, wherefore, though it is the beginning of days, it is not called by Moses first, but one.*

*For he says “There was evening, and there was morning, one day,” as though the same day often recurred. Now “one” and “eighth” are the same, in itself distinctly indicating that really “one” and “eighth” of which the Psalmist makes mention in certain titles of the Psalms, the state which follows after this present time, the day which knows no waning or eventide, and no successor, that age which endeth not or groweth old.*

*Of necessity, then, the church teaches her own foster children to offer their prayers on that day standing, to the end that through continual reminder of the endless life we may not neglect to make provision for our removal thither. Moreover all Pentecost is a reminder of the resurrection expected in the age to come. For that one and first day, if seven times multiplied by seven, completes the seven weeks of the holy Pentecost; for, beginning at the first, Pentecost ends with the same, making fifty revolutions through the like intervening days. And so it is a likeness of eternity, beginning as it does and ending, as in a circling course, at the same point. On this day the rules of the church have educated us to prefer the upright attitude of prayer, for by their plain reminder they, as it were, make our mind to dwell no longer in the present but in the future. Moreover every time we fall upon our knees and rise from off them we shew by the very deed that by our sin we fell down to earth, and by the loving kindness of our Creator were called back to heaven.*

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10. In the tenth excerpt we draw on a letter between Saint Basil and his close friend Saint Gregory the Theologian.

Basil to Gregory Letter II



2. *We must strive after a quiet mind. As well might the eye ascertain an object put before it while it is wandering restless up and down and sideways, without fixing a steady gaze upon it, as a mind, distracted by a thousand worldly cares, be able clearly to apprehend the truth. He who is not yet yoked in the bonds of matrimony is harassed by frenzied cravings, and rebellious impulses, and hopeless attachments; he who has found his mate is encompassed with his own tumult of cares; if he is childless, there is desire for children; has he children? anxiety about their education, attention to his wife, care of his house, oversight of his servants, misfortunes in trade, quarrels with his neighbors, lawsuits, the risks of the merchant, the toil of the farmer. Each day, as it comes, darkens the soul in its own way; and night after night takes up the day's anxieties, and cheats the mind with illusions in accordance. Now one way of escaping all this is separation from the whole world; that is, not bodily separation, but the severance of the soul's sympathy with the body, and to live so without city, home, goods, society, possessions, means of life, business, engagements, human learning, that the heart may readily receive every impress of divine doctrine. Preparation of heart is the unlearning the prejudices of evil converse. It is the smoothing the waxen tablet before attempting to write on it.*

*Now solitude is of the greatest use for this purpose, inasmuch as it stills our passions, and gives room for principle to cut them out of the soul. [For just as animals are more easily controlled when they are stroked, lust and anger, fear and sorrow, the soul's deadly foes, are better brought under the control of reason, after being calmed by inaction, and where there is no continuous stimulation.] Let there then be such a place as ours, separate from intercourse with men, that the tenor of our exercises be not interrupted from without. Pious exercises nourish the soul with divine thoughts. What state can be more blessed than to imitate on earth the choruses of angels? to begin the day with prayer, and honor our Maker with hymns and songs? As the day brightens, to betake ourselves, with prayer attending on it throughout, to our labors, and to sweeten our work with hymns, as if with salt? Soothing hymns compose the mind to a cheerful and calm state. Quiet, then, as I have said, is the first step in our sanctification; the tongue purified from the gossip of the world; the eyes unexcited by fair color or comely shape; the ear not relaxing the tone or mind by voluptuous songs, nor by that especial mischief, the talk of light men and jesters. Thus the mind, saved from dissipation from without, and not through the senses thrown upon the world, falls back upon itself, and thereby ascends to the contemplation of God.*

*that beauty shines about it, it even forgets its very nature; it is dragged down no more by thought of food nor anxiety concerning dress; it keeps holiday from earthly cares, and devotes all its energies to the acquisition of the good things which are eternal, and asks only how may be made to flourish in it self-control and manly courage, righteousness and wisdom, and all the other virtues, which, distributed under these heads, properly enable the good man to discharge all the duties of life.*

4. *Prayers, too, after reading, find the soul fresher, and more vigorously stirred by love towards God. And that prayer is good which imprints a clear idea of God in the soul; and the having God established in self by means of memory is God's indwelling. Thus*

*we become God's temple, when the continuity of our recollection is not severed by earthly cares; when the mind is harassed by no sudden sensations; when the worshipper flees from all things and retreats to God, drawing away all the feelings that invite him to self-indulgence, and passes his time in the pursuits that lead to virtue.*

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11. In the final excerpt we draw from his Ascetic work. He again outlines the schedule of prayer throughout the day.

III.—Ascetic.

*The services of the day are thus marked out. The first movements of heart and mind ought to be consecrated to God. Therefore early in the morning nothing ought to be planned or purposed before we have been gladdened by the thought of God; as it is written, "I remembered God, and was gladdened;"[[Ps. lxxvii. 3](#), LXX.]the body is not to be set to work before we have obeyed the command, "O Lord, in the morning shalt thou hear my voice; in the morning will I order my prayer unto thee."[[Ps. v. 3](#).]*

*Again at the third hour there is to be a rising up to prayer, and the brotherhood is to be called together, even though they happen to have been dispersed to various works. The sixth hour is also to be marked by prayer, in obedience to the words of the Psalmist,[ [Ps. lv. 17](#).]"evening, and morning, and at noon will I pray, and cry aloud: and He shall hear my voice." To ensure deliverance from the demon of noon-day,[ [Ps. xci. 6](#), LXX.] the XC1st Psalm is to be recited. The ninth hour is consecrated to prayer by the example of the[ [Acts iii. 1](#)]Peter and John, who at that hour went up into the Temple to pray. Now the day is done. For all the boons of the day, and the good deeds of the day, we must give thanks. For omissions there must be confession. For sins voluntary or involuntary, or unknown, we must appease God in prayer.*

*At nightfall the XC1st Psalm is to be recited again, midnight is to be observed in obedience to the example of Paul and Silas,<sup>5</sup>[ [Acts xvi. 25](#).] and the injunction of the Psalmist.[[Ps. cxix. 62](#).]*

*Before dawn we should rise and pray again, as it is written, "Mine eyes prevent the night watches."[[Ps. cxix. 148](#).]*

Here the canonical hours are marked, but no details are given as to the forms of prayer.