Medieval Christian Liturgy

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Summary

The liturgy of the medieval Christian West (ca. 600–1500) provided the structure around which life in Western Europe was structured for almost a thousand years. Rooted in Christian antiquity, in the early central liturgical structures of Initiation and Eucharist, the private and public observance of daily prayer, and the development of a liturgical year, the long medieval period that followed saw a broadening elaboration and expansion of the liturgical life of Christians in many different directions. By the year 1200, theologians had defined seven of the Church’s liturgical rites as primary sacraments: Baptism and Confirmation (from the ancient initiation sequence); Eucharist; Penance (with the emphasis on private confession of sins); Ordination (through various minor orders to the three major orders of deacon, presbyter, and bishop); Extreme Unction (anointing of the sick, now reserved for the gravely ill); and Matrimony (as the liturgical rites for the originally domestic rituals of marriage become more elaborate and set in the church rather than the home). A more fulsome cycle of the liturgical year developed around the ancient feasts of Easter, Pentecost, Christmas, and Epiphany, augmented by an elaborate calendar of commemorations and feasts of saints. Monastic influence resulted in a daily round of liturgical prayer, the Divine Office, in which various “hours” of prayer during the day and night were marked by liturgical “offices” of psalmody and scripture—some longer, others more brief. One of the major ways this liturgical growth and diversity can be studied is through an examination of the various liturgical books compiled and used during these medieval centuries, books used for the celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass), for the Divine Office, and for other liturgical rites. In addition to the volumes containing rubrics and prayers for liturgical celebrations, a separate cluster of books contained music to be used during these rites, in a style known as chant; Gregorian chant became the dominant form. The full impact of medieval liturgy as it was experienced in the Western Europe, however, extended far beyond the “bare bones” contained in these books, intertwined as it was with the development of art and architecture, law and commerce, and the political/socio-economic developments that would take Christian society and
Chronology

The medieval period spans almost one thousand years of Christian history in the West, ranging from Greenland to Hungary to the east and west, and Norway to Italy, north to south, depending on the beginning and ending dates one chooses. Historical periods are rarely, if ever, so sharply delineated, and this is more intensely true of the western Middle Ages. Late antiquity blends into the early medieval period, and the later Middle Ages overlaps with both the Renaissance and Reformation eras. A helpful starting point for liturgical studies is about the year 600 CE, corresponding with the papacy of Pope Gregory I (d. 604 CE); a useful concluding date is correspondingly 1500 CE, just a few decades after the publication of the Missale Romanum 1474 (on which the Tridentine MR 1570 would be based) and just a few decades before Luther’s condemnation at the Council of Worms (1521). The medieval period itself can be roughly subdivided into three more specific sections: the early Middle Ages (roughly from 600 to 1100 CE); the high Middle Ages (1100 to 1300 CE); and the late Middle Ages (1300 to 1500 CE).

1. The early Middle Ages was a time of growth and expansion for western Christianity, spreading through both the preaching of missionaries and the military strength of secular rulers. At the beginning, much of Europe north of the Alps was thinly settled; initially there were few hamlets and cities among the rural fields and wilderness. The estates of nobles and monasteries were often centers for pastoral ministry. Gradually, the diocesan system expanded, and the number of cathedrals (and larger towns and cities in general) increased. As in late antiquity, the bishop was the center of the liturgical life of his diocese, and certain liturgical ministries continued to be delegated to priests, not only in smaller churches in towns, villages, and rural estates, but also in cathedral cities and the cathedral itself. Political and social structures underwent a sometimes turbulent development during this time. During the early 8th century, Muslim armies invaded the Iberian peninsula; all of Portugal and most of Spain became part of the Islamic Umayyad caliphate, called Al-Andalus. In many of the regions of western and central Europe (e.g., France and Germany), the “Renaissance” of the late 8th and 9th centuries under the Carolingian Frankish kings (and supported by the establishment of the Holy Roman Empire centered north of the Alps) was a time of artistic, literary, and liturgical flourishing. Later in the 10th and 11th centuries, Roman political manipulation of the papacy and Viking expansion from the far north caused disruptive social instability in many areas. By the mid–11th century, the papacy was dominated by reform-minded popes, one of whom, Gregory VII (d. 1085), initiated reform of the clergy and the liturgy, and successfully persuaded political and religious leaders in the expanding northern Christian kingdoms to abandon the Mozarabic liturgy and adopt the Roman rite. Scandinavia was largely Christianized by the early 12th century, and the threat of violent Viking raids waned.
2. The High Middle Ages was a time of population growth, increased urbanization, and social change. Schools established at monasteries and cathedrals formed the basis for the foundation and growth of medieval universities. A fresh theological method, scholastic theology ("from the schools"), flourished in the university environment and offered more sophisticated development of Christian doctrine. By the late 12th century, the theologian Peter Lombard defined several of the Church’s liturgical rites as primary "sacraments" that are both signs and causes of grace: Baptism, Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance, Marriage, Ordination, and Anointing of the Sick (Extreme Unction). The Fourth Lateran Council (1215), one of the most important councils in the history of the western Church, issued several decrees that had an impact on the liturgical life (even in the contemporary period). In general, trade expanded, leading to the development of a merchant class operating on a renewed cash economy. Craftsmen formed guilds in towns and cities, attracting members from more rural areas, and adopting their own patron saints for veneration. Increasing focus on the New Testament in modeling Christian life (prompted by Crusades to the Holy Land and increasing criticism of the worldliness of the clergy) led to the rise of new religious groups, engaged in non-monastic forms of ministry and prayer. Especially influential were the mendicant religious orders, whose religious life was lived in this urban, non-monastic setting and was marked by preaching, study, and mobility. The most notable of these were the Dominicans, founded by Dominic Guzman (d. 1221) and the Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi (d. 1226). Since not all of these new movements were considered orthodox in belief and practice, these founders were careful to obtain papal approval for their communities. Members of these mendicant orders taught at universities and became influential in scholastic theology (e.g., Thomas Aquinas, of the Dominicans, and Bonaventure of the Franciscans). Others of these new groups had been or would be denounced as heretical, and yet others were influenced by the revival of an older, more "Manichean" dualistic theology (the Cathars/Albigensians) that challenged the traditional Christian understanding of God, the world, and salvation.

3. The Late Middle Ages was marked by both turbulence and revival. Climate shifts led to colder temperatures and agricultural stress, and a violent outbreak of bubonic plague in the mid-14th century decimated the population and resulted in the breakdown of many social systems (outbreaks would continue through the 18th century). The struggle between the kings of England and France led to the long-term devastation of the Hundred Years’ War (1337–1453). The strengthening of these centralized monarchies influenced the papacy as well—for most of the 14th century, popes and the papal court and offices (the curia) resided in Avignon, and under French influence, rather than in Rome. The papal return to Rome in 1377 was marred by a contested papal election the following year, leading to a schism in the papacy when first two, then three, clerics claimed to be the validly elected pope. European Christians throughout Western Europe were divided in their loyalties, and even the specialists in canon law (ecclesiastical law) at the universities were uncertain about which contender was the legal pope. The matter was only resolved in 1417 with the election of Martin V, at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), and the papacy eventually achieved its most “princely” form. Theologians criticizing abuses among the clergy and
in the church became increasingly vocal in the later 14th and 15th centuries. Combined with the influence of 15th-century Renaissance humanistic studies, these reform-minded authors contributed to the events of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations of the 16th century. Their writings spread widely after the printing press came into use in the mid-15th century (about 1440). Older liturgical and devotional practices were questioned and reexamined in the light of improved access to New Testament and patristic sources, many brought to Western Europe after the fall of Orthodox Christian Constantinople to the Muslim Ottoman Empire (1453). The movements toward liturgical consolidation and uniformity during this period can be understood in this context.

The Liturgical Year

Much of the church’s liturgical ritual was influenced by the liturgical year, that is, the pattern of seasons and feasts celebrated over the course of a year. There were two cycles of liturgical time: the **temporal** cycle, including specific penitential or festal seasons as well as major feast days, usually connected with the commemoration of events in the life of Christ; and the **sanctoral** cycle, composed of the feasts and commemorations of universal and local saints. Major feast days of both the temporal and sanctoral cycles were followed by an additional week of dedicated and exclusive liturgical celebration, called an **octave** (from octo, eight).

By the medieval period, the Church observed several liturgical seasons of the year. Two involved periods of preparation in advance of the two most important feast days of the western church: Advent, which preceded Christmas; and Lent, which came to an end with the celebration of the Triduum (from the evening of Holy Thursday, through Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, and ending the evening of Easter Sunday). These two feasts initiated their own celebratory seasons: the Christmas season, concluded by the feast of the Epiphany (January 6) and its octave (January 13); and the Easter season, concluded by the feast of Pentecost fifty days later (and its octave). The date of Easter follows a lunar cycle (like the Jewish celebration of Passover, its original context), and is therefore a “moveable” feast. Essentially, Easter falls on the Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The precise calculation is more complex, and involves other factors such as the use of a set date for the equinox (March 21) and the day of a “standard” full moon (the “Paschal full moon”), rather than the actual astronomical phenomena. Therefore, the dates of other religious observations in the Lent and Easter seasons are also variable: for example, Ash Wednesday, Ascension Thursday, and Pentecost Sunday. The date of Christmas was set as December 25 in the mid-4th century and was therefore celebrated on that fixed date no matter what the day of the week or the phase of the Moon, like the feast days of Mary and the saints. Sundays during these seasons were numbered, for example, the first Sunday of Advent or the third Sunday of Lent. The Sundays between Epiphany and the beginning of Lent were counted as Sundays after Epiphany, and those between Pentecost and Advent, as Sundays after Pentecost. Other feast and fast days were also part of the **temporale**, for example, Candlemas (February 2), commemoration the Purification of the Virgin Mary after the birth of Christ or the feast of the Annunciation (March 25, also known as “Lady Day”). The temporal cycle could also be expanded. In the later 13th century, for example, inspired by the mystic Juliana of Cornillon (near Liège), a new feast was added to the universal calendar: the feast of Corpus Christi (“the
Body of Christ”). First promulgated in 1264 by Pope Urban IV, it gained Church-wide acceptance after it was reconfirmed by Pope John XXII, in 1317, and was celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

The sanctoral cycle was composed of feasts of the saints. These feasts were rooted in the more ancient veneration of early Christian martyrs and confessors at Rome and elsewhere; as time went on, other men and women who lived what the surrounding community considered to be lives of exemplary holiness came to be venerated also as saints. Traditionally, the date of the saint’s death was chosen as the date of his or her feast, his or her dies natali, the day of (re)birth into eternal life. Most early medieval saints were indeed local saints; it was not until the late 10th century that the first saint was officially “canonized” by a pope (Ulrich of Augsburg, in 998 CE). Some saints’ feast days would be celebrated by the universal church, while others might be celebrated in certain geographical areas, or by members of certain religious orders or secular associations.

This superstructure of liturgical time had a direct impact on the texts of the liturgy, particularly for the Mass and Office. Copies of this liturgical calendar came to be included in the Missal and the Breviary, with local additions for feasts observed on the local level of diocese or religious order. The texts and chants for each celebration of the Mass and Office came from one of two resources: the “Ordinary,” that is, those parts of the liturgy that remained invariable for every service; and the “Proper,” those parts of the liturgy that changed according to day, season, and feast. So, the Church’s liturgy retained, at every service, both stability and variety. The actual manipulation of the various textual components could, however, become quite complex.

**The Mass: Theological Context**

Medieval liturgy was rooted in the liturgical developments of late antiquity. The celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) was at the heart of medieval liturgical life, regardless of the season. Therefore, it is useful to discuss briefly the interaction between medieval eucharistic theology and the actual celebration of the Mass. In addition to the public Mass offered on Sundays, during the earlier Middle Ages, the celebration of Mass had been extended to every day of the week (with the exception of Good Friday, on which no Mass was offered, but communion was distributed from previously consecrated hosts); the texts and music used would vary according to the liturgical season, feast, or day of the week. The practice of offering private Masses (celebrations when, at minimum, only a priest and acolyte might be present), developed from the earlier custom of offering a more simple version of the Eucharist (the Missa privata, that is, non-public and “deprived” of its full ceremonial) with small groups on certain occasions or for certain intentions or reason. Some of these were developed more formally into votive Masses (“vow” or “dedicate”), with their own proper sets of prayer texts, or formularies. In the later medieval centuries, the number of these private Masses increased dramatically; the theological theme of the Mass as sacrifice, a representation/repetition of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross, played an important role in this development. These Masses could be offered for any one of a number of special intentions or reasons, but came to be most frequently offered on behalf of a deceased person, for which the priest would be offered a stipend (normally a small sum of money). The doctrine of purgatory as it developed during the medieval period stated that persons who died either in a state of lesser
sin, or with penance for their sins still left undone, would need to be spiritually purified before admission to Heaven. However, the prayers of the living on their behalf could shorten ("remit") this period of purifying penitential suffering, so the powerful spiritual benefits of the Mass could be applied to the deceased on whose behalf it was offered.

Theological issues concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species also had an effect on the celebration of Mass in the medieval period. In the 9th century, two monks of the same abbey of Corbie in northern France, piqued the interest of Charlemagne’s grandson, Charles the Bald (d. 877; King of West Francia and Italy, and eventually, Holy Roman Emperor) in a discussion of the correct understanding of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharistic species. The monk Paschasius Radbertus held that the Body of Christ present in the Eucharist was that identical to the historical body of Christ, born of Mary and ascended into heaven; his confrere, the monk Ratramnus, instead supported the idea of a real, spiritual presence of Christ, based on the essentially Platonic idea that spiritual reality was a reality superior to that experienced in the material world through the senses.

Some two centuries later, another theologian, the archdeacon Berengar of Tours (d. 1080), would three times be condemned for advocating the spiritual presence of Christ, and rejecting a “physicalist” interpretation of the real presence like that espoused by Radbertus. The earliest retractions that he was required to sign included a statement that this “true” body of Christ was “crushed by the teeth of the faithful” when they received communion. This physicalist position was eventually superseded in the later 12th and 13th centuries by the concept of transubstantiation, which made use of a more Aristotelian framework. Simply put, physical objects were understood to be composed of both substance (the inner reality) and accidents, various elements of physical appearance to the senses, which could vary without changing the inner essence of reality, the substance. In the case of the bread and wine at Mass, the substance, or inner reality, of bread and wine, was replaced at the consecration, and instead the inner reality of the body and blood of Christ became the substance. The accidents, that is, the outer appearance of the bread and wine to the senses, remain the same.

These early medieval theological stresses, coupled with other cultural issues, may have led in part to the decline in the actual reception of communion by the laity. In response, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) mandated that every Catholic was obligated to go to confession and receive communion at least once a year. At about the same time, the practice began of elevating the host immediately after the words of consecration, for the assembled congregation to view, in an act of what has been called “ocular/visual communion.” Superstitions had already begun to arise about benefits to health from gazing at the host, and stories arose about men or women who had managed to steal a consecrated host to use as a kind of superstitious charm to ensure a safe journey or a good harvest.

Inside of churches, consecrated hosts were increasingly “reserved” near the main altar, instead of in the sacristy or on the side of the main church, to accommodate not only the provision of communion for the sick or dying, but also those who wished to pray before the eucharistic Presence of Christ. A niche or box on the side of a wall might be used, or, in a more elaborate style, the sacrament might be kept on an elaborate pedestal (a “sacrament house or tower”), or suspended from the ceiling, often in a container shaped like a dove. The Fourth Lateran Council mandated that the reserved sacrament (as well as the chrism, consecrated oil) be kept under lock and key. In the 13th century, a special display stand for carrying a
consecrated host in procession, the monstrance, came into use, and became more elaborately designed as the period progressed.

**Liturgical Books**

A liturgical book is generally understood to be one that is actually used during a liturgical celebration, as opposed to one intended for reference, utilized to prepare or plan ahead of time, or offering commentary on the liturgy. Examples of volumes that prove useful in providing historical background or theological insights on the liturgy include: the medieval *Liber Pontificalis* ("book of the popes") a collection that (with some irregularities) offers biographies and descriptions of the activities of the popes; liturgical commentaries from various medieval authors (like Amalarius of Metz [d. 850] or William Durandus [d. 1296]); or handbooks that offer different kinds of instruction about liturgical rites, like the earlier medieval penitentials, or the late medieval *Liber sacerdotalis*.

Another influential factor is the reality that the Roman liturgy was not the only liturgical system in use during the early medieval period. Initially, different western rites, in this case referring to geographically defined traditions of liturgical uses, developed in several areas, including Rome, Benevento, and Milan (the Ambrosian Rite) in Italy, Spain (the Mozarabic Rite), and France (the Gallican Rite, particularly in *Francia*, the early medieval kingdom of the Franks). Beginning in the 7th century, the early Roman rite was diffused to many other areas of the western church and continued its development with lesser or greater local adaptation. This is especially true of the strong Gallican (and later, Germanic) influence on the shape and content of the Roman liturgy.

In the earliest period, there were a number of different collections or books used during the celebration of the Mass, the Divine Office, and other liturgical rites. With a few exceptions, the titles used for some of these books could vary. In later centuries, there was a pronounced tendency to compile individual volumes (or small sets of volumes) that were more comprehensive, containing in a single book, at least the minimum, if not most of the textual material required for that specific rite or by that specific presider. In time, the nomenclature used for these liturgical books became more uniform:

1. The *Missale* (*missale plenum*/*missalis plenarius*, the "full" missal), containing all of the texts necessary for the priest or bishop to celebrate Mass, not only the prayer texts and directions (the *rubrics*, written in red ink), but also the scriptural readings and basic chants;
2. The *Pontificale* (pontifical), the book for the bishop, containing the texts for the rites at which he was expected to preside;
3. The *Rituale* (sometimes *Manuale*, manual), the priest’s book, containing the texts of the rites that formed part of his liturgical ministry;
4. The *Breviarium* (breviary), the book(s) used by the major clergy as well as men and women members of religious orders for the daily celebration of the Divine Office.

Other liturgical books were also used, both in the earlier and later medieval periods, by others involved in liturgical activity, for example, those involved with liturgical music (the choir or chanters) or those charged with preparation for individual liturgical celebrations (masters of ceremonies). Some were more fully
elaborated excerpts from one of the major liturgical books for use on specific occasions—for example, liturgical processions held at certain times of the year (the Processionale). In addition, some liturgical books used by monastic communities would differ in a number of ways from those used by diocesan clergy or communities of canons associated with a cathedral.

The Missal

For the celebration of the Eucharist, or Mass (the more common term in western Christianity, from the Latin missa), the earliest prayer collections were composed of individual libelli, or booklets, containing the texts of Mass prayers, or formularies, for a particular day or feast. These would eventually be bound together in a single volume; the earliest of these collections is the Verona manuscript, (Veronense from the library of Verona, in which it was discovered), also called the “Leonine sacramentary” because it had earlier been thought to date from the papacy of Leo I (d. 461 CE). While this collection is incomplete, and as a volume may not have functioned as a sacramentary itself, it is a valuable source for understanding the spirituality and development of the Roman liturgy in the earliest part of the medieval period. Next, copies of these collections of libelli would be produced as entire books, the sacramentaries. Initially, these sacramentaries contained the public prayer texts (the orationes) used by the priest or bishop presiding at the Mass at the opening of Mass, at the offertory, and after communion. In Roman use, these prayers tended to be brief, succinct, and stylized in phrasing and construction. Sacramentaries could also contain more liturgical material, texts for the celebration of other rituals that would later be moved into the pontifical or the ritual.

During the 8th century, elements from both Roman and Frankish use resulted in a mixed sacramentary tradition, called the Gelasian tradition (once attributed to Pope Gelasius I). The first exemplar is the Old Gelasian (Gelasianum Vetus); the earliest manuscript dates from about the year 750 CE and may have been produced near Paris. At first, most 20th-century editors hypothesized that this sacramentary was based on a (lost) Roman presbyteral book, used not by the pope but by the clergy in charge of the numerous smaller church communities in Rome, the tituli (title churches). More recently, some have challenged this assumption, proposing instead that the Old Gelasian was the work of Frankish Merovingian compilers using both Roman and Frankish sources, and stressing the importance of political factors in its shaping. The Gelasian sacramentary tradition was later expanded with the production of a newer generation of sacramentaries that included other elements into the Roman/Gallican mix; these are called the “8th-century” Gelasians. Like the Old Gelasian, these manuscripts were also produced north of the Alps; examples include the sacramentaries of Gellone, Angoulême, and Rheinau.

In the latter part of the 8th century, the reigning king of the Franks, Charlemagne (also regarded as the first of the Holy Roman Emperors) requested a copy of a Roman sacramentary from Pope Hadrian (d. 795). This sacramentary, known as the Hadrianum (traditionally attributed to Pope Gregory I), became the basis for another textual family, that of the Gregorian sacramentaries. An initial “supplement” of other Mass formularies from the Frankish tradition (sometimes referred to as the Hucusque, after the first word of its introductory lines) was added to the original Hadrianum by Benedict of Aniane; this compound sacramentary was
circulated widely during the 9th century. Eventually the texts in the supplement were integrated into the main text, and other material was added. It is this Gregorian sacramentary tradition that formed the core of what became the later Missale Romanum.

Like the *libelli missarum*, similar collections of descriptions of how to perform various liturgical rites were also gathered in Rome. Each description, or *ordo*, essentially provided detailed “stage directions” for presiders like the pope, bishops, and other clerics to follow while performing a specific liturgical rite; collectively, these texts are known as the *ordines Romani*. The oldest of these *ordines* may reflect Roman liturgical practice of the early 7th century; all show some Frankish/Gallican influence, some more than others. A number of these *ordines* dealt with the Mass (particularly papal Masses), but others were to be used for other liturgical celebrations, some of which (along with the Eucharist) would come to be classified as sacraments (primary liturgical rites) in the 12th century, for example, baptism. Others dealt with wider patterns of liturgical celebrations—for example, Holy Week—or liturgical rites that, while remaining part of the Roman liturgy, would not appear on the later medieval list of the seven sacraments, for example, funeral rites. Still others contain directories of material to be used at the Divine Office.

With the exception of the Creed (introduced into the Roman Mass during the 11th century), the basic invariable structure of the “ordinary” of the Roman Mass was essentially set by the beginning of the 7th century. Beginning in the 9th century, this *ordo Missae* began to be elaborated by the interpolation of other ritual elements, including gestures, versicles and responses, longer psalmody, and private prayers (many of them *apologiae*, penitential in tone) for the presider to recite at several points during the Mass. These ritual moments, usually when there is a pause in the official prayers or actions, have come to be called liturgical “soft spots.” The hypothesis is that these “empty” moments tend to accrete additional private texts and gestures, intended mostly for the use of the presider. Examples include the preparation for Mass (for instance, prayers to accompany the donning of individual liturgical vestments), during the chants of antiphons or responses (like the Introit, the Kyrie, or the Gloria), or during the communion rite. This development seems to have taken place in roughly three stages; the last, the Rhenish type during the early 11th century, is marked by several very florid *ordines missae*, which present what amounts to a private, parallel rite for the bishop—or priest—presider interwoven with the public structure and prayers of the Mass itself.

The readings at Mass were originally marked in the margins of copies of the New Testament or Bible. In addition, during this early medieval period, lists of the initial and closing lines (*incipits* and *explicits*) of specific readings for daily Masses were compiled into documents called *Capitularia* (“little head,” chapter), one type for the selections (*pericopes*) from the Gospel readings, and another for those taken from other scriptural books, used for the first of the two readings in the Roman rite, called the *epistle*, or “letter,” since these were most frequently taken from one of these New Testament documents. The full texts of the selections themselves were also collected together into a book for the use of the reader at Mass (the lector), in a type of book variously called the *comes* (“one who accompanies,” companion), *liber comitis*, or *liber lectionum* (“book of readings”), among other variations. Further, the epistle and gospel readings could be reproduced in two separate books, the *epistolary* and the *evangeliary*. All of the western rites had their own lectionaries at this time; the eventual list that makes
its way into the various forms of the later medieval full missal (Missale plenum) in the Roman rite is a Frankish–Roman hybrid.

Over time, mixed Roman–Gallican–Germanic sacramentaries diffused back over the Alps to Rome itself. At the end of the 11th century, Pope Gregory VII initiated a liturgical reform aimed at purifying this Roman liturgy from excessive Teutonic elements. This marked the effective end of the elaborate ordines missae used in parts of France and Germany, although some of the apology–type prayer elements, for example, the Confiteor, remained as part of theordo missae through the end of the medieval period and beyond. The general tendency during later medieval centuries was for the consolidation of liturgical books into single volumes designed for the use of a priest–presider either for a private Mass or a more public Mass. In this period, all of the components necessary for Mass were gathered together in a single volume for the presider’s use: the prayer texts themselves; the general ordo missae; parts of other detailed ordines (called rubrics because these directions were written in red, not black, ink); the readings; and the necessary chants from the collections of liturgical chants (most importantly, the antiphonale and the graduale, see the section “Chant Books”). In the 13th century, the liturgical books for the growing papal curia were streamlined to take into account their increasing administrative duties. These were the books adopted by the one of the new mendicant orders, the Franciscans, due in part to their more active urban ministry and their non–monastic, mobile way of religious life. This curial/Regula (rule) Missal was revised further in the mid–13th century by the English Franciscan Haymo of Faversham, and could be was produced in smaller manuscript formats, to be more easily carried from place to place. In the 14th century, the Roman curia itself adopted Haymo’s edition of the Missal. As might be expected, the use of the printing press in the following century had an immense impact on the eventual uniformity of the Roman liturgy. A print edition of the Missale Romanum, based on the 14th-century Missal of the Roman curia, was published in 1474. This was this edition that, combined with a redaction of the Mass rubrics prepared in the first years of the 16th century by John Burchard (Ordo servandus per sacerdotem in celebration Missae sine cantu and sine ministris secundum ritum S. Ecclesiae Romanae, 1507) would form the basis of the edition prepared after the Council of Trent (1545–1563). To eliminate errors, clerical improvisations, and confusion among the laity during the turbulent Reformation period, Pope Pius V mandated this new edition, the Missale Romanum (1570) for all Roman Catholic communities, with the exception of diocese and religious orders whose Eucharistic rites were two hundred years old or older, who had the option to retain them. Several religious orders opted to retain their Missals, including older monastic orders like the Carthusians and the Cistercians, and newer orders of mendicants and canons like the Dominicans and the Premonstratensians (Norbertines).

The Pontifical

The pontifical seems to have undergone at least some of the same stages of development as the missal. First, libelli containing the prayer texts for individual rituals conducted by the bishop were collected from other sources (including sacramentaries and ordines) and compiled into more complete volumes, which could also contain texts for various blessings that a bishop might be called upon to bestow. These earliest pontificals, all dated after 800 CE, would also contain other material that would be later transferred to the rituale, or manual of other rites for the use of a priest; pontifical rituals would eventually be excluded from this
presbyteral volume. Included in the pontifical were, for instance, rites for confirmation and ordination, coronation rites, rites for the reconciliation of penitents and for the consecration of a cemetery, and blessings for use at Mass and Office.

There are several examples of early medieval pontificals dating from the 9th and 10th centuries. One mid-10th century text, a hybrid Roman–Germanic pontifical, was produced in Mainz, a key diocese in the Holy Roman Empire. Political influence accelerated its rapid spread north of the Alps and its acceptance in Rome. Here, it underwent additional revision, and became the “core” of Roman pontifical tradition: first, in various forms of the pontifical in 12th-century Rome, then, in the next century, with a more stable textual tradition, the Pontifical of the Papal Curia. During the late 13th and 14th centuries, this pontifical came into contact with another Pontifical, compiled and edited by of the bishop of Mende (southern France), William Durandus (d. 1296). Durandus used earlier Roman pontificals as well as local sources for his Pontifical, and it was this version of the Pontifical (with minor editing by papal secretaries and masters of ceremonies Agostino Piccolomini and John Burchard) that became the first printed edition of the Roman Pontifical (1485). A later printed edition (by Alberti Castellani, 1520) became the text used for the Roman Pontifical issued after the Council of Trent (1595).

The Rituale

In the early medieval period, there was no one single book containing all of the non-eucharistic liturgical texts over which priests would preside. Like the sacramentary and the pontifical, the texts of many individual rites were first produced in booklet form, the *libellus*, a practice for ritual texts that continued through the high Middle Ages. These non-eucharistic rituals could also be found appended to other liturgical books ("composite rituals"), most especially the pontifical; others included the sacramentary, the psalter, or the collectar. Other blessing prayers (*benedictiones*) could also be listed among these other ritual materials. For instance, a French monastic volume, dating from about the year 1100 CE, contains both a psalter as well as a ritual section (which in turn includes several *benedictiones* as well as an *ordo missae*).

Beginning in the 12th century, these presbyteral texts began to be collected in a separate book, the *Rituale* (sometimes entitled *Sacerdotale*, *Manuale*, or *Agenda*). Here, priest-presiders could find the texts for these other liturgical rites, which were part of their ministry: for example, baptism, marriage, anointing of the sick, and funerals. Lists of blessings for various persons and religious objects also included, for example, the blessing of candles or palms. Monastic ritual collections often included other rites proper to monasteries (abbatial blessings, profession of monastic vows) and omitted others that might be not within the scope of their pastoral care (like baptism, or the purification and blessing of women after childbirth). At times, the contents of these ritual collections would be altered by canonical legislation. For example, the Fourth Lateran Council prohibited priests from taking part in what were known as trials by ordeal. In earlier centuries, some of these tests of guilt or innocence were conducted in a liturgical context, with a priest saying Mass before the ordeal and reciting exhortations and blessings over the “instruments” of these trials (e.g., hot water or heated iron). In most of Western Europe, these rites disappeared from the ritual books during the 13th century.
The ritual continued to be heavily influenced by local liturgical custom and practice throughout the medieval period. While there were attempts to compile a standard book of Roman rituals in the 16th century, none were officially adopted. Even the post-Tridentine Roman Ritual (Rituale Romanum), published in 1614, was offered as a “standard,” but did not officially replace other ritual traditions.

Breviary

The celebration of the Divine Office (officium, duty or service) each day was a constant part of the medieval liturgical experience at cathedrals and monasteries of both monks and nuns. Communities of canons, clerics who resided together (and some of whom followed a set structure, or rule, of life), formed the backbone of the liturgical life in a medieval cathedral; a major part of their duties included the daily public celebration of the Divine Office. Monastic communities of men and women also structured their daily cloistered lives around the celebration of the Divine Office. Rooted in late antiquity, these “hours” of prayer essentially consecrated the passage of each day with the praise of God. In the west, this was the structure popularized by Benedict of Nursia in his Rule (c. 540 CE): monastic celebration of the Office (also the opus Dei, or work of God) included additional shorter prayer services throughout the course of the day. The passage of time during the day was reckoned according to the earlier Roman “hours,” each lasting about three standard hours; the nighttime was similarly divided into “watches.” In the Benedictine Rule, these were the hours of prayer:

1. Matins/Vigils (morning), a major office celebrated after midnight, about 2:00 or 3:00 a.m.;
2. Lauds (praise), another major office celebrated around dawn;
3. Prime (first), a “little hour” celebrated about 7:00 a.m.;
4. Terce/Tierce (third), a “little hour” celebrated about 9:00 a.m.;
5. Sext (sixth), a “little hour” celebrated about 12:00 noon;
6. None (ninth), a “little hour” celebrated about 3:00 p.m.;
7. Vespers (evening), a major office celebrated around sunset;
8. Compline (complete), a “little hour” celebrated before bed.

These times are approximate because of the changing length of day and night during the seasons of the year. As a benchmark, it is helpful for non-Europeans to note that Rome is on the same latitude as Chicago, which means that most of Western Europe (with the exception of parts of Italy, Portugal, and Spain) experiences the same seasonal shift in the length of the day and night as various parts of Canada. Benedict himself includes specific instructions in his Rule on differences in the summer and winter liturgical schedules.

The core of the Office was the recitation of the psalms in a particular sequence, so that ideally the entire 150-psalm psalter could be recited within a specific period of time. Different communities divided the psalms among the hours differently, and the Roman psalter used a slightly different Latin version than the Gallican psalter. In addition, because references in some psalms made references to time of day, certain psalms were used only for certain offices, for example, Lauds or Vespers. Other elements were also part of the ritual structure: the office hymn; the reading(s), including non-scriptural readings in the reading-heavy office of Matins; scriptural canticles (Lauds and Vespers); orations (collects) recited by the
In the early medieval period, several books were necessary for the celebration of the Divine Office. The psalter contained the texts of the psalms, and the antiphonale (antiphonary), the various chants for the psalms with their accompanying antiphons. Scriptural readings for the hours could be found in a marked Bible, or using a capitulary; other readings (required for the nine readings, divided into groups of three and arranged in liturgical units called nocturns, that formed part of the office of Matins) might be taken from a martyrology or a Legenda (containing longer texts of the lives of the saints) or from a sermon by a saint, found collected in a volume called a homiliar. The other hours came to be assigned a single, short reading, a capitulum. The prayers for the presider could be found in the sacramentary or, later, in a book called the collectar (from “collect,” another term for a short presider's prayer). Collectars could often be found combined with other books used for the Office, for example, the psalter, or the book of office hymns (hymnar/hymnarium/liber hymnorum), as well as with the texts for other rituals (see section “The Rituale”).

The breviary first came into use in monastic communities, then among secular clergy, during the 11th and 12th centuries. As the name suggests, it was an abbreviated or condensed version of the Office, used at first in addition to the other Office books, both by members of monastic communities and local non-monastic clergy. The actual texts and chants used for the celebration of the Divine Office varied widely among religious orders and dioceses. At first, the presumption was that the secular clergy (and later, members of the new mendicant orders) would recite the Office together daily, in common; however, by the end of the medieval period, the common expectation was that, if this were not possible (as was the case for many priests and deacons, as well as members of some religious orders, for instance, individual Franciscans if away from their communities), the Office should be recited privately. The breviary became essential for fulfilling this obligation. In the 12th century, the papal curia had its own breviary, which was revised during the 13th century; it was this breviary that the Franciscans adopted and adapted for their own use (using the Gallican version of the psalter instead of the Roman). This integrated, single-volume breviary was sometimes divided into two parts or volumes: one for winter use (pars Hiemalis), and the other for summer (pars Aestiva/Aestivalis). These breviaries became the models for other diocesan breviers until the publication of a revised Roman Breviary in 1568. Like the Missale Romanum (1570), it was to replace breviary traditions in use for less than two hundred years. Only in the mid-16th century was the breviary divided into four parts or volumes, one for each of the four calendar seasons.

**Chant Books**

Various forms of sung recitation were used in medieval liturgy, both at Mass and during the Office (and in some other rites as well). While there were several early medieval chant traditions, Roman Gregorian chant (attributed to Pope Gregory the Great) spread to Frankish territory in the 8th century, during the reign of Pepin III (“the Short”), who is said to have invited experts in chant from Rome to teach in his kingdom. As was the case with the sacramentaries and the ordines, this original Roman chant was also influenced by Frankish practice and expanded by additional chant material in later centuries.
There were several points during the Mass that antiphons—phrases or lines usually taken from the psalms, sometimes followed by other psalm verses—would be sung in a particular style known as “chant.” These come at the beginning of Mass, before the reading of the Gospel, the “Alleluia” as the Gospel book is brought forward, at the offertory (as the bread and wine are brought to the altar), and during communion. These chants are part of the Proper of the Mass, that is, among the texts that vary from day to day. Other chant texts for the Mass belong instead to the Ordinary, the invariable parts of the Mass, for example, the Kyrie, the Sanctus, or the Agnus Dei. The same is true for the Office.

The term *antiphonale* (from “antiphon”) came to be used for books containing chants for the Office, while the *graduale* (“step,” referring to the step of the ambo or reading stand from which the Mass readings were proclaimed) was the chant book used for the Mass. Other chants were developed from the 9th to the 11th centuries: tropes, sung phrases or texts woven into the chanting of a main text, like an alleluia, were collected into a book called the *Troper*. This volume contained other new musical compositions used during the Mass or Office during this period, like sequences, individual chanted “poems” added after the alleluia on certain feast days. And since the alleluia before the Gospel was omitted on penitential days and seasons, it was replaced (beginning about the 9th century) by another new chanted text, called the tract.

Books containing the antiphons, graduals, tropes, and other chants for use during the Mass, Divine Office, and other sacramental and liturgical rites, as well as texts proper for various liturgical seasons and feasts, continued to be local in nature and diverse in content during the late medieval period. Various dioceses and religious communities used their own particular chant and hymn traditions, and other forms of musical expression (e.g., polyphony) became more widespread. Much of the Gregorian chant tradition was forgotten or poorly reconstructed. For a number of historical and cultural reasons, the *Liber Usualis*, a substantial collection of the most widely used chants in the Roman liturgy, only appeared at the end of the 19th century, with papal approval. It was prepared through the manuscript research of Dom Prosper Guéranger and the monastic community of the French abbey of Solesmes.

**Additional Considerations**

The pattern of liturgical life in the medieval period can be described in three words: local, varied, and complex. Perhaps it is better to describe the experience of medieval liturgy as a texture, serving as a backdrop for, and interwoven with, daily life. Birth, marriages, and deaths all had their own sets of liturgical rites, often combined with community gatherings. Local farmers would have their fields blessed during the spring, on days of fasting and prayer known as the Rogation days. Laborers and their families enjoyed time off from work on Sundays and feast days. Pilgrims at the start of their travels were publicly blessed, young men and women professed religious vows, and members of guilds observed the feast days of their particular patron saints with festive processions.

Liturgy also shaped, and was shaped by, social, political, and cultural life in general. Architectural styles in church design reflected and conformed to developments in liturgical practice—Gothic ambulatories, for example, with
smaller chapels to support the celebration of daily private Masses. Political leaders influenced the development of liturgical books; some were produced for noble patrons, others ordered in attempts to unify a particular realm. Later claims in support of the “divine right of kings” were rooted in the liturgical anointing of these rulers during coronation rites; medieval Holy Roman emperors visiting parts of the empire would be greeted at the city gates by special acclamations and processions of welcome, the laudes regiae.

The study of medieval liturgy in all of its forms and on all of its socio-cultural levels is a continuing process. During the first part of the 20th century, liturgical scholars interested in the medieval period concentrated on the preparation of critical editions of various key liturgical books, available only in manuscript form. Some areas, like the medieval Mass and Office, have been the focus of intense study; others, like the rituals, much less so, partly because of the number and complexity of the widely variable manuscript texts. The study of medieval liturgical music became a specialty in its own right, as did medieval art and architecture. However, with a substantial amount of editorial work done, specialists in other medieval disciplines can and should now make use of these more readily available printed editions in their own research in theological, historical, and cultural studies. This interdisciplinary work has gone slowly, although some studies have appeared more recently and have provided helpful models for future work. Part of the difficulty lies in the complexity of both the liturgical structures themselves and the written sources that provide an initial starting place. But liturgical celebrations cannot be apprehended fully based on the texts found in the liturgical books themselves; a number of other elements must be considered. The architectural and geographical environment, the hierarchical and political influences, the considerations of class and gender, and the economic and social developments of each century must be understood and interwoven with theological, linguistic, and artistic interpretation. Only then can medieval liturgy be comprehended in all of its manifold dimensions.

**Historiography**

Medieval liturgical books and commentaries on the liturgy were produced in manuscript form before the introduction of the printing press in Europe in the mid-15th century. For a number of theological, political, and polemical reasons, the collection, transcription, and publication of many of these manuscript texts spread in earnest in Western Europe from the 16th century on. Important collections include Giovanni Bona, *Rerum liturgicarum libri duo* (1671–1672; edited by Roberto Sala, 1747–1753); Jean Mabillon, *Museum Italicum* (1687); Edmond Martène, *De antiquis Ecclesiae ritibus* (four volumes, editions from 1702 to 1788); Jacques-Paul Migne, *Patrologica Latina* (multiple volumes published during the 19th century); and the on-going *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (MGH; from 1826–).

The turn of the 20th century saw a burst of European publication activity in the area of medieval liturgy. The English Henry Bradshaw Society (HBS), formed in 1890 and exclusively dedicated to publishing editions of “rare” liturgical texts, offered its first volume in 1891 and continues its publication program today. The Vatican Library published the first of its continuing series *Studi e testi* in 1900, which includes liturgical books among its other volumes, and Peeters Publishers, in Leuven/Louvain, Belgium, began its series of historical Christian texts and
authors, *Spicilegium sacrum louvaniense* (SSL), in 1922; several medieval liturgical editions appear among its editions of other theological works. Mid-century, other European series including editions of liturgical manuscripts began to appear. Examples include: the *Spicilegium Friburgense* (SF), from the University of Freiburg in Switzerland (1957–); *Liturgiewissenschaftliche Quellen und Forschungen* (LQF), sponsored by the Abt–Herwegen–Institut, Abbey of Maria Laach in Germany (1957–); the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (1953–) (CCSL) and the *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* (1966–) (CCCM), both directed by an academic board originally organized through Steenbrugge Abbey (St. Peter’s Abbey), Belgium.

Many of the first contemporary critical editions of key liturgical manuscripts appeared as volumes in these European series, including the Gregorian and the “Old” Gelasian sacramentaries, the *Ordines Romani*, and the texts of the medieval Roman pontifical tradition. The investigation of liturgical development in the later medieval period began to build momentum. Secondary sources on the texts and development of medieval liturgy also appeared during the 20th century, prompted by historical interest or the result of the growing Roman Catholic liturgical movement. These are too numerous to list here, but they range from Adolf Franz, in the early 20th century, to Josef Jungmann in mid-century.

After the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the number of historically based studies of almost every element of Western Christian liturgy were published, by Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars alike, primarily in Europe and the United States. The Catholic liturgical renewal provided the impetus for similar renewals of Christian liturgical life in many different denominations. A key element in many of these studies was a consideration of the medieval development of the liturgical rite in question, to offer an enriched basis for the revision of contemporary service books and pastoral practice. Additional areas of study with a direct impact on liturgical rites came also to be included among these publications, including canon law, musicology, art and architecture, and ritual studies. At the turn of the 21st century and in its early decades, a number of historians and liturgical scholars continue to expand the examinations of intersections among liturgy, art, and society in the Middle Ages.

Bibliographical note: In the 1960s, several articles by medieval liturgy specialist Cyrille Vogel appeared, offering readers a bibliographic guide to the study of medieval liturgy; these would be collected, expanded, and published as *Introduction aux sources de l'histoire du culte chrétien aux moyen âge* (1966). Along with Eric Palazzo’s *A History of Liturgical Books: From the Beginning to the Thirteenth Century* (1998), these two volumes are essential introductions to the study of medieval liturgy through the lens of the liturgical books themselves.

The bibliography that follows has been compiled to offer a list of secondary sources in English, each offering additional bibliographic references to numerous primary source editions as well as secondary sources and more specialized studies in a number of other languages.

**Further Reading**


**Notes**


Most significant among the Christian additions to the basilica, and the central focus for the liturgy, was the altar upon which the eucharist was celebrated. Medieval worship. The structures of both the liturgy and church architecture remained basically the same in the Middle Ages, but became increasingly complex and diverse as Christianity spread throughout the empire. We can think of the liturgy as the script and the church architecture as the stage upon which it was performed (below). Religious practice in medieval Europe (c. 476-1500 CE) was dominated and informed by the Catholic Church. The majority of the population was Christian, and “Christian” at this time meant “Catholic” as there was initially no other form of that religion. Medieval LiturgyBlended Forms. The development of the Christian liturgy in Europe—that is, the forms and arrangements of public worship—reflects shifts in political and cultural dominance throughout the medieval period. Source for information on Medieval Liturgy: Arts and Humanities Through the Eras dictionary. "Medieval Liturgy." Arts and Humanities Through the Eras. Encyclopedia.com. 11 Aug. 2020. "Medieval Liturgy."