

Q. *Lately, our priest has been having something called “Vigil” on Saturday nights and on some weeknights. Also, one of our neighboring parishes is having “Matins” on Sunday morning before liturgy. I know that we have Vigil on Christmas Eve and Matins on some of the evenings during Lent and Holy Week, but is this weekly stuff a change, or is it something old that is being brought back?*

A. In The Psalms, the Prophet David declares to God, “Seven times a day will I praise Thee, O Lord.” The early Christians took this declaration as a mandate and, within the first decade, had instituted the practice of marking certain times or “Hours” of each day with public or private prayer. The normal hours or times of prayer were:

Evening- After 4:00 p.m.
Midnight- some time halfway between sunset and sunrise.
Cockcrow- Dawn or about 4:00
Morning- Sunrise

Which are times when Our Lord specifically commanded us to “Watch and Pray, for ye know not when the Master of the House cometh.” As well as:

Third hour- About 9:00 a.m.
Sixth hour- About Noon (When the sun was at its zenith)
Ninth hour- About 3:00 p.m.

These were times in the day when the Jews customarily offered prayer, both privately and in the Jerusalem Temple. These hours of the day are also connected with important events in Christian history. The Holy Spirit descended at the 3rd hour. Our Lord hung on the Cross at the 6th hour, and gave up His Spirit at the 9th hour. We can see, for example, in Acts, that St. Peter was praying at Noon when he had his vision of the sheet descending from Heaven (Acts Ch. 10).

As the Church spread, its first converts among the gentiles were often domestic slaves or servants. For this reason, public or communal worship had to be confined to the evening and night. Thus, it became the custom of the early believers to gather before dusk (VESPERS), to light lamps after dark and to pray through the night, observing the midpoint of the night with the blessing of loaves, boiled wheat and wine, and being anointed with olive oil. After this pre-midnight meal they would continue singing psalms, reading from the Gospels and Epistles, and offering hymns and prayers until near dawn. At this point, they would proceed with the Divine Liturgy, and then return, at early morning, to their labors. (Romans did not have a regular day of rest, so Saturdays and Sundays were normal work days for most of the people.)

We can see, from this, that the early Christians considered prayer to be very important, that they prayed at certain times and a certain number of times (The Muslim prescription of five times for daily prayer was actually a relaxation of historic Christian practice.), and that this prayer was sometimes communal and, at other times, was, of necessity, private.

As Christian monasticism developed, often far from a priest or temple, it tended to produce one style or tradition of daily prayer that was heavily dependent upon the Psalms, which every monk and many ordinary Christians had committed to memory. On the other hand, the communal worship of the city or village community tended to encourage a cycle of prayer which was filled, not only with psalms, which were sung antiphonally, but with “Hymns and Spiritual Songs,” as St. Apostle Paul describes.

With the end of the persecution of the Church in the 4th Century, both of these traditions existed, side by side for centuries, until they gradually merged together into our present cycle of services. Some changes occurred in this process, and some variations persist up to our own time. For example, Compline or bedtime prayers came to be served or prayed communally, Midnight Office or Nocturnes fell out of common observance, except in monasteries and on certain occasions, and some of the services came to be grouped together in clusters or “Akloths” which facilitated the organization of the workday around meals and times of prayer.

Vespers, for example, was usually preceded by 9th hour. Matins, and its companion service of Lauds or “Praises,” were followed directly by 1st hour. Further, 3rd and 6th hours were usually grouped together at mid-day and were read before the daily Liturgy or Typika service which replaces the Liturgy when it is not served.

At other times these services are combined differently, so that Vespers and Matins may be prescribed to be served together on the eves of Sundays and certain great feasts. By this combination of services, called “Vigil” or “All-night Vigil,” the ancient Christian pattern of prayer “Through the watches of the night” is recreated. All of this can be, and in fact is, very technical. What is simple and easy to understand, however, is that the early Christians always observed three elements in the worship of The Lord’s Day. These elements were:

- Sunset- The Celebration of Salvation history from Creation to the Awaited Second Coming of Our Lord with special emphasis upon Our Lord as the “Light which Shines in the darkness,” or “Light which illuminates all”.
- Dawn- Which celebrates Salvation History, as it were, in reverse, carrying us from the Last Judgement back to the Creation of the Cosmos.
- And Eucharistic Liturgy- Which is outside of time and empties us of the constraints of temporality into the anticipated reality of the Kingdom of Heaven. (The Liturgy, it should be noted, does not “stand for” anything, as it is the realization of what it figures and is, rather a liberation from earthly meaning, than some alternative meaning of its own. For this reason, the time for Liturgy in the scheme of the other services changes, depending upon the character of the day being observed.

It has been the normal practice of EVERY ORTHODOX CHURCH in every nation and culture

to preserve these three elements of worship, at least on the Lord's Day and Major Feasts.

In the Orthodox home countries, one of two practices is followed. Either the Vesper Service is served in the evening, and Matins followed by Divine Liturgy the next morning, or Vespers and Matins are served together on the eve, with Divine Liturgy following in the morning. The practice of serving Vespers and Matins together (The Vigil Service) is the norm in the Russian tradition from which our O.C.A. derives most of its tradition. This is also the normal practice of most monasteries. Mediterranean Churches, on the other hand, tend to serve Vespers on Saturday Night, and to begin the Sunday morning worship with Matins. Some of our parishes, under southern Slav influence, have historically followed this pattern, as do the Albanian, Romanian and Bulgarian parishes of the O.C.A.

But I suspect that the question you are asking is, "Why does this seem to be new in my parish?" My answer would be that, over the years and decades following the Russian Revolution and the close of our seminaries, many bad practices developed in the U.S. Sometimes the problem was that the priests didn't feel that they had the books, or music, or singers and readers to do the services correctly. In some parishes, Vespers was continued as a remnant of the Vigil, but the Matins portion was simply omitted. This comfortable pattern satisfied the remembered need for an Evening Service, so gradually the need for Matins was forgotten. Some "Modernist" priests tried to create a pseudo-Vigil consisting of most of Vespers and the "most exciting" parts of Matins.

In a few parishes, where Matins was served on Sunday Morning, the priests intentionally abolished it, feeling that it had become a "Low Mass," which people might substitute for the Sunday Liturgy. Further, some of the parishes which had observed Saturday Vespers and Sunday Matins, abolished the Saturday service on the basis that, "Nobody comes to it."

This idea that Church services are "Theatrical productions," which require audiences, rather than the Worship of the Life Creating Trinity, has, perhaps been more responsible than any other factor in the loss of the Vespers / Matins / Liturgy sequence of Sunday and Holy Day Services.

If your priest has restored the ancient cycle in your Parish, then thank him and encourage him by attending Vigil more regularly. He is doing nothing more than his ordination vows committed him to do. Those whose parishes are not offering the canonical sequence of services should let their priest know that they would be happy to help, to support and attend the services if allowed to. We certainly should be at least as eager to participate in the ordinary cycle of Orthodox Prayer, as were our spiritual forbearers who left their slave labor every Saturday afternoon so that they could enter into Heaven for a few hours before returning to their daily travail on Sunday morning.