CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PRAYER FOR THE PEOPLE: THE BOOK OF HOURS

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INTRODUCTION

For three hundred years the Book of Hours was the bestseller of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. From the mid-thirteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, more Books of Hours were commissioned and produced, bought and sold, bequeathed and inherited, printed and reprinted than any other text, including the Bible.

The main reason for this popularity lies in the book’s contents. The Book of Hours is a prayer book that contains, as its heart, the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, that is, the Hours of the Virgin. (For this reason the Latin term for the book is *Horae*, Hours). The Hours of the Virgin are a sequence of prayers to the Mother of God that, ideally, were recited throughout the course of the day, Hour by Hour. Other prayers usually found in the *Horae* helped round out the spiritual needs of late medieval and Renaissance men and women. The Penitential Psalms, for example, were recited to help one resist the Seven Deadly Sins. The Office of the Dead was prayed to reduce the time spent by one’s friends and relatives in purgatory.

The Book of Hours played a key role in the late medieval and Renaissance cult of the Virgin. Marian devotion placed the Mother of God in the pivotal role as intercessor between man and God. As our spiritual mother, Mary would hear our petitions, take mercy on our plight, and plead our case to her Son who, surely, could not deny his own mother anything. In a Europe dominated by cathedrals dedicated to Notre Dame, the Hours of the Virgin were deemed Our Lady’s favorite prayers, the quickest way to her heart.

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1 This essay originally appeared in *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*, Thomas J. Heffernan and E. Ann Matter, eds., Kalamazoo, 2001 (2005, revised second edition). In the present volume, the bibliography has been updated and the illustrations are expanded.
The Hours of the Virgin are at least as old as the ninth century; they may have been developed by Benedict of Aniane (c. 750–821) as part of a monastic movement that could not pray often enough. To the Divine Office, the daily (including nightly) round of prayers the medieval Church required of her ordained (priests, monks, and nuns), were added the Hours of the Virgin. By the mid-eleventh century, they were an established Church practice. By the late twelfth century, the Hours were also found in Psalters, the prayer books containing all 150 Psalms, a Calendar, and among other prayers, usually the Litany and the Office of the Dead. By the early thirteenth century, an era of increased literacy, both Psalters and the combined Psalter-Hours were used by not only the clergy, but also the laity. By the mid-thirteenth century, however, laypeople began commissioning their prayer books without the cumbersome Psalter, but with the other parts, such as the Calendar, Hours of the Virgin, Litany, and Office of the Dead, intact. Thus, the Book of Hours as we know it was born. By the late fourteenth century, the typical Book of Hours consisted of a Calendar, Gospel Lessons, Hours of the Virgin, Hours of the Cross, Hours of the Holy Spirit, the two Marian prayers called the “Obsecro te” and the “O intemerata,” the Penitential Psalms and Litany, the Office of the Dead, and a group of about a dozen Suffrages; any number of accessory prayers complemented these essential texts.

Books of Hours were easy, even enjoyable, to use. The core text, the Hours of the Virgin, remained basically the same every day. The only variable was the three Psalms that constitute the nocturn of the first Hour, Matins. (The three Psalms changed depending on the day of the week: Psalms 8, 18, and 23 are read on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays; Psalms 44, 45, and 86 on Tuesdays and Fridays; and Psalms 95, 96, and 97 on Wednesdays and Saturdays; in addition, some Horae contain minor textual variations for the Advent and Christmas seasons, but this is more the exception than the rule.) The contents of the remaining Hours, Lauds through Compline, did not change at all. And the other parts of the typical Book of Hours were also unchanging: Gospel Lessons, Hours of the Cross and of the Holy Spirit, Penitential Psalms, and so forth. One was certainly encouraged to pray the Hours of the Virgin (and, time permitting, the Hours of the Cross and of the Holy Spirit) and the Office of the Dead on a daily basis. The other common texts offered variation, as did the numerous accessory prayers that owners freely included in their Horae.